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Nov 2017 Issue 97

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Gardeners' world

Television presenter and garden designer Mark Lane tells Martin Bewick about his lifetime love of plants

Over the past couple of years, regular viewers of *Gardeners' World* on BBC2 have become familiar with Mark Lane's friendly and insightful reports from fantastic garden spaces around the UK.

On the long-running TV show – which marks its 50th anniversary this year – Lane can be seen enthusing over beautiful wildflower planting schemes, and demonstrating how easy, or difficult, it is to manoeuvre his wheelchair around the gardens.

“Doing the show has been a wonderful experience,” he says. “The crew are amazing, and the presenters have all been so down to earth and welcoming.”

“But the whole horticultural industry is like that; everyone's very helpful, even if they're in competition with each other at a big flower show such as the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) show at Chelsea. People who work with plants and in garden design all absolutely love it, just as I do.”

Yet, despite a love of flowers as a child, Lane had never intended to be either a gardener or TV presenter.

“From a young age, I followed my grandparents around their gardens,” he says. “I had a little trowel, a blunt pair of scissors and a little blue cart that I'd pull around the garden. They were the ones who taught me about plants. My paternal grandfather told me how and when to plant vegetables, and loved his sweet peas and clematis, and we grew cress on the windowsill. My maternal grandmother had a garden full of roses and the scent was beautiful. I was fascinated by it all.”

“I grew up in an apartment in Hove near Brighton, and we didn't actually have a garden ourselves. We did overlook the South Downs, though, and could be on the sea front in 20 minutes. I loved the countryside and I would draw and paint plants and butterflies.”

“I had an aptitude for it, and it led me to study art history at A-level, and then at University College London. I loved it. Then, after university, I went into

publishing – I did medical publishing and financial publishing, and, finally, arts and architecture publishing.”

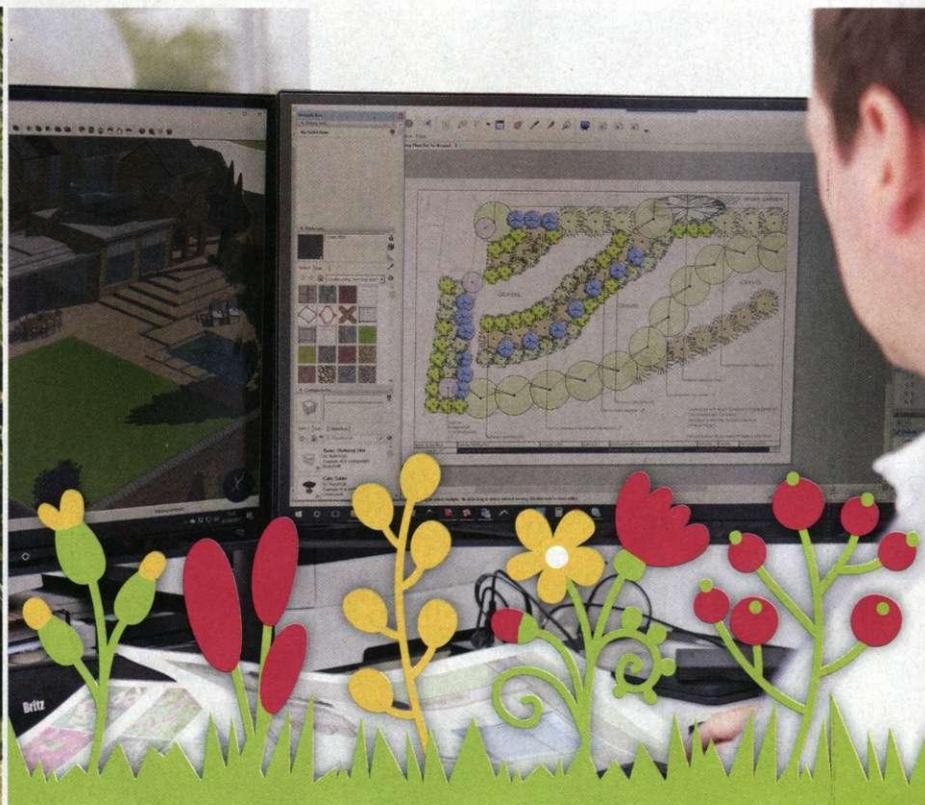
CAREER CHANGE

That career in publishing seemed mapped out, but change was to come.

“I met Jasen, who's now my civil partner, and we moved from Greenwich to Kent, near Ashford, to a house with a larger garden. We felt very lucky. B&Q needed a garden makeover for a book we were working on. I said they could do mine, and that I'd already done a design for it – and it got published in the book. This, to a small degree, is where my career in garden design started.”

Lane was born with spina bifida, but says that “apart from balance problems and having the occasional stumble” at this point in his life he was walking and active. Then, he was in a car accident.

“That was 17 years ago now,” he says. “The result, after a lot of surgery on my spine, and because of my spina bifida, was that I ended up in a wheelchair. You go to dark places, and wonder what



you're going to do. I certainly couldn't commute to my job in London any more, and that meant I had to give up publishing – which was a problem, because I absolutely loved it.

“After a long rehabilitation period, my partner, family and friends convinced me that I could do something with my knowledge of plants.

“I looked for garden design courses at universities and colleges, but at the time the set-up for access for disabled people was diabolical – I was told by many places I couldn't ever get a diploma because I couldn't do the physical side of it. I eventually found an open learning course online that accepted me.

“Mark Lane Designs was set up 10 years ago. At first I was doing work for friends, for free, to build up the business portfolio. Then, in recent years, we were getting paying clients, and I decided I needed to get the message out that disabled people can do landscape design too. I started writing articles about my experiences with access, and one of these was published in *Gardeners' World* magazine. Later, the BBC rang me

up, out of the blue, and asked if they could send a film crew down to what they call a 'piece to camera', with me showing them plants in the garden.”

TELEVISION PERSONALITY

Lane says he dismissed that first TV appearance as something of a one-off, but then he received another call.

“They asked if I'd cover the Chelsea Flower Show for them,” he says. “I thought it was a joke – this was the crème de la crème of flower shows! But my motto these days is 'never say no', so I went along and did it, and I enjoyed it, too. The crew were lovely and wanted to wrap me in cotton wool at first. I told them just to treat me like anyone else, and that I'd tell them if I was tired or in pain.

“It went really well and got good viewer feedback. I was invited back to cover the Hampton Court Flower Show, and then to do a piece on *Gardeners' World* itself. Then, at the end of last year, I got a call to say I would be a full-time presenter for the show in 2017. Doing the TV work is great, but I still love the design work – I love

plants and meeting people every day. It's been a wonderful journey.”

Lane's work with clients now involves designing large private gardens, which he says are often better from a wheelchair user's point of view, plus small gardens, and sensory gardens for hospitals, hospices and charities.

“If I was still working in London, gaining access to small urban gardens might be difficult for me,” he says. “But I'm also about to get myself an off-road wheelchair, which I'm really looking forward to, and which will help tremendously with my job. “Around 20 per cent of my clients are





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wool at first

disabled, but whether they're disabled or not, I always explain to clients that they will hopefully want to use their gardens in years to come, and that with age comes all kinds of infirmity and sometimes chronic conditions. It's always worth thinking about how easy it will be in future to get around your garden."

ACCESSIBLE DESIGN

For Lane, accessible design means creating a garden that everyone can enjoy. His list of considerations is lengthy and goes well beyond flat, firm paths. For example, he says raised beds for wheelchair gardeners can help, but not if they can't reach and twist. What about tables with plants on, that you can get your knees under? What about

getting long handled tools? What about suitable turning spaces for wheelchairs?

"Every disability is different. Chairs are different," he says. "Then there's the problem of glare and silhouetting for visually impaired people. Could you use tactile materials, or plants that indicate that they're in a certain part of the garden through smell? You need to understand what the individual's requirements are. What are they sensitive to? From here you can build a picture of the garden design."

Lane also says that not having a garden doesn't mean you can't enjoy plants.

"Try herbs on your windowsill or window box. You can even have spring bulbs for your windowsill – little daffodils and beautiful cyclamen. The way I explain the indoor environment is to think of your house as if it's a woodland. It's shady under the trees, with not much sunlight.

"You can try woodland plants indoors – ferns, for example. If your window is in scorching sun, think about Mediterranean

plants such as small lavenders. Google it, look it up and give it a go."

Whatever the space, Lane's passion for plants shines through. It's a sunny, positive sense of enjoyment that reflects a wider worldview:

"I think being in a wheelchair has changed my life for the better," he says. "I've heard other people in similar situations say the same thing. It has completely changed my outlook. If I can show that just because you're disabled or in a wheelchair it doesn't necessarily mean that you have to give up, then that's great. Sometimes it means making a leap of faith, which is what I did – but I haven't looked back." ■

Find out more

Mark Lane Designs

marklanedesigns.com

Gardeners' World

bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006mw1h

