

MARK LANE

Pictures: BBC

Gardening cured my blues after failed spine op

The BBC Gardeners' World presenter tells **CHRISTINE FIELDHOUSE** how he found his life's purpose after surgery left him confined to a wheelchair

TO THE millions of viewers of BBC Gardeners' World, renowned landscape designer Mark Lane has become a familiar face in recent years, presenting the long-running and much-loved show alongside stars such as Monty Don and Carol Klein.

But few know the obstacles the broadcaster, 48, has overcome in order to get where he is today.

Mark, who recently presented coverage of the Chelsea Flower Show, was in his mid-30s when he discovered that the back pain that had dogged him on and off since his teens was actually caused by spina bifida occulta, a condition that occurs when the spine and spinal cord don't develop properly in the womb, causing a gap in the spine.

"Looking back, I'd had a strange gait from when I was a child," he says. "I dragged my feet and would trip up. I could never ride a bike because I had balance problems but a GP had told me I had inverted ankles, so I put everything down to that."

"I did yoga as a teenager and at university because I had some lower back problems but spina bifida never crossed my mind."

Spina bifida occulta is thought to affect between 10 and 20 per cent of the population but most people don't know they have it as there are usually no symptoms. It can be discovered in adulthood when patients have X-rays or scans for other conditions. It can cause various problems including weakness or total paralysis of the legs, incontinence and loss of skin sensation in the legs.

"I discovered that about three per cent of people with spina bifida occulta go on to have lower back and peripheral nerve problems," says Mark, who lives with partner Jasen, 52, in Canterbury, Kent. "That's what happened with me."

IN 2006 Mark underwent the Wallis ligament procedure.

An implant was inserted between the vertebrae but within days it was clear it hadn't worked.

"The surgery didn't do anything at all," recalls Mark. "Soon after, I started getting peripheral nerve sensations across my body. From my toes up to my head, it felt as if someone had plugged me into an electric socket."

"It was a very quick deterioration after the operation. Within a month I had a gradual loss of feeling in my legs. The consultant had warned me the operation would either work or make it worse. I felt as if someone had put bricks on my back. I could barely move at all."

Mark had returned to his work as a publisher part-time a month after the operation but within a few weeks he was in too much pain to carry on. Four months later he was also diagnosed with myalgic encephalopathy (ME).

"I could no longer get upstairs at our three-storey barn. If I tried to exercise, I was bed-bound for two or three days," he says.

A month later, again disaster struck when Mark was involved in a car accident. "I didn't need hospital treatment but the crash didn't help my pain at all." One last



NEW LEASE OF LIFE: BBC Gardeners' World presenter Mark Lane and, left, Mark with the rest of the team from the show

attempt to alleviate Mark's pain with a four-hour spinal desensitisation operation, in which nerve blockers were put into the spinal area, also failed and Mark was told he had run out of options.

"I had a period where I was unable to get out of bed, unable to do anything," explains Mark. "I knew using a wheelchair was just around the corner. The dark spectre of depression sat on my shoulder 24/7. There were days when I was really down and I would go to a very dark place."

Mark and Jasen, a computer programmer, moved to a bungalow near Canterbury, Kent, where they had a bigger garden than they'd had before.

Mark, who was being treated for depression and by then using a wheelchair, found he was happiest when he was outside in the garden.

"Jasen pointed out that I have an encyclopaedic knowledge of plants and he suggested I did something with it," says Mark. "It was true. I've always loved plants."

He was accepted onto an online diploma course in horticulture which he passed with flying colours in three months.

"I loved every element of it," he laughs. "Having a purpose lifted my spirits. It was as if a little match inside me had finally been ignited."

"I felt so happy with my hands in soil, so once I qualified I started doing my friends' gardens. Soon the jobs came in and when gardens were too big for me to get around I appointed a surveyor."

Having a feature published in a gardening magazine brought him to the attention of TV producers and after doing a televised tour of his garden, he was asked to cover the

'It's magical to see plants and people blossom'

RHS Chelsea Flower Show and then Hampton Court. At the end of 2016 he became a regular presenter for Gardeners' World.

"I know television needs a broad spectrum of presenters and I represent people in wheelchairs but I seem to get a good response," says Mark, who still has his own garden design business.

"I love every minute of my work. My depression is under control, my energy levels have increased, strong painkillers control my pain and I feel as if my brain neurons are sparking again. I'm a completely different person."

Two years ago he worked on the garden at Pilgrims Hospice in Canterbury and he is now into his third year working with Thrive, a charity using gardening to help people living with disabilities or ill health.

"Thrive have created a beautiful outdoor space where people can tend to their own plot or grow something," says Mark. "It's really magical to see the people blossom as well as the plants."

"Seeing the therapists work with people is heart-warming. I love the fact gardening makes people happy; it gets them talking and they laugh, often for the first time in years."

"Just getting our fingers in soil releases serotonin, a feelgood hormone – it's the same as eating a bar of chocolate. Gardening is so good for everyone."

● Thrive is a charity that uses gardening to help people with a disability or ill health, or who are isolated, disadvantaged or vulnerable, with centres in Reading, London and Birmingham. Visit thrive.org.uk for more information