

Gardens Illustrated Article on Fiona

Fact File - January 2001

Name: Fiona Lawrenson
Age: 32
Born: Hartington, Derbyshire, England
Studied: Denstone College, Staffs.
Merrist wood, Surrey
Lives: With her husband Colin and young daughter Holly in Haslemere, Surrey
Mode of transport: Audi estate
Essential kit: Wellies and a compass
Won't leave home without: Her dog, a lurcher called Clodagh.

FIONA LAWRENSON

Fiona Lawrenson's career path to become a garden designer was certainly less than conventional. After completing a City and Guilds course in Horticulture at Merrist wood college, near Guildford, she begged Jim Gardiner, the curator at The Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley, to take her on as a student so that she could get more practical experience. "I was poverty-stricken, having been made redundant from a job in a recruitment agency that I hated," she laughs. "I tried a lot of things before I found out what I wanted to do. I taught geography and physical education in a boy's prep school in Shropshire, but found it too insular. Then I worked for an estate agent selling huge properties in Surrey – I have always been interested in houses, particularly other people's." Fiona claims that all her previous work experience has been enormously useful. "Teaching helped me to learn, and marketing and sales have been essential in running a successful business." Fiona is keenly aware of how her designs have evolved over the years. "I've gone through the rustic look and the cottage garden thing, and now I like a less cluttered look with strong lines and powerful geometric shapes." Her business took off when she received a grant of £1,000 from The Prince's Business Trust (now The Prince's Trust). She was assigned a mentor – another designer, Christine North – who taught Fiona many useful lessons. She also encouraged her to plant up The Prince's Trust stand at Hampton Court in 1993, which prompted Fiona to design a garden called 'Lost in Time' for them the following year. "It was terrifying, like falling off a horse, and the only thing was to do was to get back on and jump something higher." She made an impulse phone call to the chief executive of BskyB that changed her life. Sam Chisholm gave Fiona a cheque for £50,000 to create her gold medal-winning 'New England Garden' – she then went on to win another gold the following year with her 'Provençal Garden'. Sam also offered her a three-year contract to present their gardening programmes. But these days, it's her design practice that takes up all her time. "I got into garden design because I wanted to do something physical and see what could be achieved by getting my hands dirty, and that hasn't changed."

design philosophy

Fiona Lawrenson is a designer who hates being pigeon-holed into designing in any particular style. "I'm glad I didn't learn garden design at college because they all teach in a particular way and I like to be myself," she says. She has always been fascinated by architecture old and new and has a passion for the Art and Crafts Movement. "I love attention to detail, it's so important to garden design." Fiona loves strong colours and remembers an October holiday in Provence in 1995 when she was astonished by the colour of the grapevines. They turned the fields into a patchwork of fire and inspired Fiona to design a gold medal-winning garden. Fiona loves to plant on a large scale. "So far the largest beds I've planted were 8 metres deep by 35 metres long, which meant I could plant up to 40 of each species – it produced an incredible effect." Fiona feels one of her main strengths is her ability to collaborate. "I'm not egocentric. I love seeing the client's dreams realised and working up a design with my colleague Chris Moss; I don't think we have had a cross word in three years."

working methods

Fiona Lawrenson has been running her own garden design and construction business for ten years. Her company, Fiona Lawrenson Ltd., employs seven full time staff, including garden designer Christopher Moss, aged 29. "Chris is wonderfully artistic, and creates beautiful neat drawings. I cannot imagine working with a better designer and he has also become a great friend. He is always coming into the office with photographs of some clever solution to a building problem or over excited about some design feature he has discovered on his travels. He is a great ideas person and my skill is in seeing the ideas through," says Fiona. She likes to concentrate on formulating the brief and preparing the plans. They don't have a portfolio because Fiona believes it could hinder rather than help her clients. "I am happy to do whatever the client wants, but I would prefer us to work it out together rather than find we are being asked to do what we have done before." She says she has turned down jobs when she hasn't "clicked" with the client. "I am pleased to say I click with most people, but when I don't I think I must be the wrong person for them too! Fiona likes to specialise in large country gardens. I don't really enjoy urban spaces, they never seem to be as challenging as large gardens, and I have always like a challenge." Whenever possible Fiona likes to work with her brother, Alistair Lawrenson. Alistair runs a construction business called Freedom 2 Garden, and he and his team have built many of Fiona's gardens. Apart from the obvious creative side of designing gardens, Fiona says she just loves problem solving and the project management of a site.

How she got started

Fiona's first foray into show gardens was a Hampton Court Palace in 1993 when, with typical enthusiasm, she planted pots with her home-grown perennials for The Prince's Trust stand. The next year the Trust backed her design for a garden called 'Lost in Time' at Hampton Court. This gave Fiona a taste for showmanship and led to her debut at the Chelsea Flower Show with the 'Echoes of the Sea' garden. Fiona's next three Chelsea gardens for BskyB followed in swift succession. The 'New England Garden' and the

'Provençal Garden' won gold medals, which really put Fiona on the horticultural map – but she also found it difficult to shake off the impression that she only designed that style of garden. In 2001 Fiona won a gold medal for the best-planted garden at Shizuoka World Garden Competition, the first garden show of its kind in Japan. "I got the commission through a Japanese garden designer called Koji who I met at my first Chelsea when he designed a tea garden."

Chelsea show gardens

- 1995** 'Echoes of the Sea' sponsored by *House Beautiful*, was given a Bronze medal, shortly afterwards, Fiona rang BskyB on an impulse and was offered sponsorship for 1996.
- 1996** The 'New England Garden' designed for BskyB, was beautifully planted inside a picket fence. This time Fiona's garden won the coveted RHS gold medal.
- 1997** The 'Provençal Garden' was inspired by a trip to France and won another gold medal. The planting was sensual and luxurious, and the Pomegranate was 180 years old.
- 1998** The 'Private Chapel Garden' won a silver gilt medal. Fiona then made the leap from exhibitor to television presenter for Channel 4, covering the Chelsea Flower Show in 1999 and also 2000.

Japanese show garden

Fiona and Chris spent a month in Japan building an 'English Garden' for the Shizuoka World Garden Competition, which ran from April to the end of May. "It had been pouring with rain before we arrived, followed by a heat wave, so we had to dig planting holes with a pneumatic drill." She was paid £15,000 to exhibit, which included all her expenses. With the gold medal came a million yen prize – the equivalent of £5,000. Fiona found it a real challenge working with people who spoke limited English on the other side of the world and says it was a nightmare sourcing the plants. However, as soon as she arrived she got on brilliantly with the team assigned to her. "We were really teaching them new stuff and in the end it really looked like an English garden. One day I stuck some monster apples on sticks in the beds for fun and everyone commented on them. I was rather touched when they kept replacing the apples during the show.

major influences

The landscape: Fiona grew up in the Peak District, where her parents ran a Youth Hostel. As children, she and her brother didn't seem to have any boundaries and nothing was off limits in such wild and beautiful surroundings. Fiona is deeply affected by what lies beyond the garden gate. For instance, she has just designed a vegetable garden in an old farmyard surrounded by ploughed fields. "We used the same lines and shapes to

create the beds, paths and walls so they appeared to flow and blend into the land's contours."

Sam Chisholm: Fiona says people have been amongst the most important influences on her career. Sam, who now lives in Australia, was the chief executive of BskyB when she rang up out of the blue asking for a sponsor for a garden at Chelsea. "In two minutes he agreed to give me "50,000." He not only sponsored Fiona's first Chelsea garden but also gave her a job as presenter of a Sky TV gardening programme, which really got her career and business off to a flying start.

Christine North: is a garden designer who ran Gardens of Distinction. She was Fiona's mentor when she applied to The Prince's Business Trust for a grant to set up her garden design business. "Christine taught me such a lot and was a vital part of the learning process when I did my first show garden."

Russell Page: Fiona read his *The Education of a Gardener* when she started the business. "I love the strong clean lines of his designs, which have stood the test of time."

Gertrude Jekyll: "I think she had real vision, even though she isn't considered fashionable in Britain nowadays. The first garden I ever designed was a restoration of a Jekyll in Bramley, Surrey, and it had a very powerful effect on me. I still refer to her book, *Gardens for Small Country Houses*, which is full of wonderful detail.

Focus on a Current Project

A Sussex garden

Fiona has been working on this garden since May, 1999 and she and her team have a great working relationship with the clients, who are originally from New Zealand. "They are not hung up on detail and they give us a special kind of freedom that brings out the best in you," says Fiona. When she first took on the job, the garden had no endearing features apart from two apple trees. The clients were quite happy when Fiona suggested creating a flower bed under these trees, especially as they had designed and commissioned a spiral bench to go under one of them. "I wanted the bench to disappear and reappear with the seasons," says Fiona. the spiral bench is underplanted with *Anemone blanda*, fritillarias, pulmonarias, lamium and a carpet of *Veronica gentianoides* takes over in summer. The bamboo curtain in the garden was an experiment that the clients have welcomed enthusiastically. "It makes a wonderful sound when the prevailing wind whistles around the house," says Fiona, who decided to go for a more dramatic solution to the problem rather than going for the typical hedge or clump of trees. "It was important that it looked right, because it is the first thing you see as you enter the garden." This area is complemented by a series of box balls on the lawn, which are placed asymmetrically to draw your eye across the garden and away from the house. "I felt strongly that there should be no planting on, or in front of, the house walls. I wanted to simplify the area to give an uncluttered feel," says Fiona. Her clients supported the idea and were happy to go against convention and remove all the flower beds beside the

house. Larger beds of perennial plants were created elsewhere in the garden to give a change of texture throughout the seasons. “When we made a radical move to create a ha-ha by knocking through the garden wall, we not only allowed the landscape in by borrowing the view of the South Downs, but also took the opportunity to create beds that evoke the wonderful wild flower meadow beyond. In the meadow tenacious weeds like fat hen are weeded by hand and then at the end of the season, cattle are allowed in to graze on the plants. “They not only disturb the soil, which helps with reseeding, but some plants are regenerated when they pass through the animal’s stomachs,” Fiona explains. Pleached hornbeam act as a green structural wall around two sides of the garden, rising gracefully above the wall. The fluted trunks create a living window, looking out of the garden. Over the years Fiona and her client have built up a trusting working relationship. The most recent and radical innovation was to refashion the approach to the house when they were away on holiday. Fiona incorporated Portland stone (also used in the entrance of the house) to make the spaces connect. “We wanted to give the house more presence by planting cylinders of yew and panels of grass. These garden have been great fun to design, but we would never have achieved what we have if my clients hadn’t been prepared to take the odd risk.”