



CHRIS STONE EXPLAINS WHY THERE NEEDS TO BE MORE INDUSTRY RECOGNITION FOR MAINTENANCE AND AFTERCARE COMPANIES

Sadly, over the last few years, I have carried out little work in gardens or on landscaping sites. I spend most of my time in meetings or pricing up work. Though this is something I hope to change slightly in the future, it has also been invaluable.

Stepping back from the coal face has allowed me to view the industry from a different perspective, to put my energy into building the business, and look for opportunities as to how we can refine what we do and what we offer.

We're far from being near perfect or where we want to be, however, as the amount of work grows and quality of the opportunities improve, we've changed how we carry out much of our maintenance and aftercare work.

It's easier for change to be implemented in hard landscaping. You don't have a lot of choice but to learn new skills and deal with new materials. To produce the exquisite gardens we so regularly see, requires more skill and fine craftsmanship than ever before.

Garden maintenance, on the other hand, requires a real want to change things. We are faced with an ever-increasing list of pests and diseases, and there is a greater choice of plants than ever, so we must know what's what.

Gardens include so many different elements now, so caring for them means we need to understand them. We need to be plant care, pruning and training experts, as well as lawn care and irrigation specialists. We have to know what effect our herbicide and pesticide spraying, lawn care and cleaning products have on the client's hard landscape materials.



CHAMPIONING AFTERCARE

If we allow it to be viewed as 'just gardening', it will never be afforded the respect it deserves. I know I mentioned this in passing last month, but it's worthy of closer inspection. Just this week, I saw a post on an industry Facebook group where a member almost apologised for posting pictures of a garden tidy they carried out. Please, stop apologising! I was heartened by the response from other members of the group who suggested it was every bit as worthy of praise as a new patio or wall. We should be one industry, whether you specialise in hard landscaping, soft landscaping or maintenance.

But there is more we can do. As members of trade groups, we can enter our completed

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gardens, landscaped and planted, into a myriad of categories for judging. If you carry out the aftercare of these gardens, however, there are so few options of having your domestic work judged, and therefore, acclaim is lacking. Competition drives success and means we strive to be better – it raises standards. The two main trade associations should recognise garden maintenance and aftercare companies and individuals as part of the industry.

We see plenty of beautiful 'finished' gardens and applaud the landscaping, but we should be revisiting them a year or two on to see how they are being cared, and how the designer's vision is being realised. If this is part of what we are already seeing in our magazines and at award ceremonies, then those undertaking the



aftercare would be a step closer to receiving recognising for their contribution.

Since offering aftercare, we've seen a difference in the type of work we are carrying out, and that's down to educating our clients. We are often now engaged to 'finesse' new gardens. This hasn't happened by chance. These clients maybe wanted a run of the mill 'hoe, mow and blow' service, but by offering an alternative and physically showing them the difference, they've understood the value of the work we carry out.

Offering aftercare is the way forward – don't let it be just a tag. Put meat on the bones, consider what you do differently and how you can offer extra value to your clients. Forge relationships with designers and landscapers – give them a reason to use you.

It's time to start believing in ourselves and valuing our considerable skill, knowledge and passion, and start shouting about what it is to love gardens.

ABOUT CHRIS STONE

Chris Stone is founder and managing director of Bushy Business Ltd; an RHS and APL award-winning company which carries out garden design, hard and soft landscaping, maintenance and aftercare in domestic gardens throughout the south-east of England.

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