

UNDERSTANDING AFTERCARE



**CHRIS STONE REVIEWS
HOW DESIGNER-CLIENT
DISCUSSIONS OF
AFTERCARE COULD BE
AN OPPORTUNITY FOR
GROUNDS MAINTENANCE
COMPANIES TO GROW**

Since asking last month why some designers do not discuss the subject of aftercare and the associated costs with clients, I have been questioning why. We all know that everyone wants a low maintenance garden that looks like 'that one' from the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. But are designers completely honest about the ongoing aftercare work required from the outset? At what point do the designers broach the question of aftercare regimes? Is it when they hand over a garden? Do designers explain the pitfalls of not caring for what the client has just taken delivery of?

It's very easy to criticise, and as mentioned previously, designers may be worried that they would scare off a client with talk of spending yet more money after a garden has been considered completed. But is the reason for their reluctance to discuss it deeper than this alone?

I wonder if designers are cautious of talking up aftercare as they don't feel they can back up their demands with great people to carry out the work. The fault for this could lie at the feet of those whose business model is maintenance only, not aftercare as well.

As is always the case with business, if you can understand someone's pain and come up with a way to ease it, you could find yourself

being very busy. Maybe garden maintenance companies have not kept pace with the industry's modern, forward-looking approach. This, coupled with a potential lack of fresh blood, means we are doing the unthinkable: accepting the norm.

"It's done this way because that's the way it has always been done" is an attitude many could be accused of, but is that justified? After all, designers cannot offer what does not exist; perhaps those of us who do offer aftercare are not collaborating with designers enough.

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THE GARDEN'S DEVELOPMENT"**

As for the clients, many do not understand gardening. It is up to us to educate them and explain why aftercare is integral to the garden's development. But what is it that designers are looking for? And what do they, and the client, need from us?

Surely, they need companies that understand it's more than just keeping a garden tidy. They need us to understand their vision. This stretches beyond the plants, because as guardians of newly created gardens, we also need to understand the hard landscape materials as well. This ranges from what can be pressure washed or cleaned by hand, what should be oiled, what should be left to age naturally, and even, how the irrigation works.

All of these are important practicalities and should form the very basis of our knowledge. Therefore, it should allow each garden to reach maturity in the way the designers planned and the way the client is expecting. I find it frustrating and think it's typical of our apparent reticence to move with the times, the garden maintenance side of the industry could do more to help itself.

There will be those that already offer all of this and don't see it as a big deal, but you should do – surely you are missing a trick if you don't.

Don't get me wrong, this isn't just a rebranding exercise, you don't become a 'specialist' by having it written on your van or business card. There needs to be sound knowledge, skill and attention to detail for it to be a specialist field.

I don't think the industry has ever been less 'one size fits all' and there is a huge business opportunity here. A skilled aftercare company could be invaluable to designers in the same way hard landscapers are.

If they felt more supported and more confident about their options, then perhaps designers would feel more able to champion garden aftercare and be honest with clients from the outset.

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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