

A growing friendship

Their shared love of garden design grew first into a firm friendship, then a professional partnership – which saw them win Silver Gilt at Hampton Court this summer. Alice Ryan meets Vanessa Hoch and Rachel Pocock, the design duo creating spaces with brains as well as beauty.

Pictures by Warren Gunn and VaRa Garden Design

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great garden should look lovely – that's a given. But, say Vanessa Hoch and Rachel Pocock, it should be far more than a pretty face: it has to be practical, too.

"When we were training, we saw so many gardens that looked beautiful, but were totally impractical; you couldn't live with – or in – them," says Rachel. "What we're interested in is real gardens: gardens that work for the people that use them; gardens that give people genuine pleasure."

It's a description that befits the friends' debut show garden: called Foundations for Growth, it exhibited at this summer's Hampton Court – the largest flower show in the world.

Winning a prestigious Silver Gilt medal, only one step away from a Gold, the garden also won praise from TV's Joe Swift. Touring the plot as part of his BBC coverage, he complimented the planting and said it was surely "one of many show gardens to come" from VaRa Garden Design, Vanessa and Rachel's joint venture.

"Our aim was to do a show garden and for it to hold its own alongside all the others... So to win the Silver Gilt? It was just amazing," says Rachel. >



» Even from the photos, it's not hard to see why Foundations for Growth impressed the judges. Set out around a focal sunken area, the hard landscaping – in contrasting cool grey stone and warm rust-red steel – is clean and contemporary; all straight lines and sharp corners.

But the planting is soft, inviting, even voluptuous: great swathes of green – spanning tall, swishy grasses and low-growing tufts of golden ilex – are punctuated with shots of rich purple (heuchera) and hot orange (day lilies).

There's a drama in this juxtaposition of man-made and nature-grown; this garden is an interesting place to be.

There are adventurous touches, too. Take the use of astroturf, as Mr Swift put it, "people can be a bit snobby... but it works really well". The sunken area is carpeted with faux grass, and skinny strips are inlaid in the walling of the raised beds, cleverly drawing your eye from ground to border. "We weren't aiming for a naturalistic look," says Vanessa, pictured above. "We just thought of it as another texture; another source of colour."

As a quote, etched on to a tall steel panel, reveals, this garden has a story to tell: "Information alone can never become knowledge, and knowledge never becomes wisdom, without some kind of rooting in the soil of experience" – James Raffan.

The theme – of education as a voyage of both academic and personal discovery – was inspired by Vanessa and Rachel's time at Capel Manor College, where both trained in garden design.

"That's how we met: we shared the same table for three years," says Vanessa. Collaborating on an end-of-course competition entry (they won) brought home how much they enjoyed working together: "We realised that we had lots of similarities, but also that we challenged each other to see other angles too."

That design was the seed of their show garden. Garnering sponsorship from both Capel Manor and Provender Nurseries, which had backed the student competition, Vanessa and Rachel also drummed up support from their fellow students at the college: all the hard landscaping, for example, was done by trainees in construction.

"When you consider that none of us had done anything

like it before, it's quite amazing," smiles Vanessa.

Both she and Rachel took the Capel Manor course alongside part-time day jobs: Vanessa co-ordinates marketing and communications for a group of special schools, while Rachel is a senior physiotherapist in the NHS. Both also have children: Vanessa's girls are 6 and 9, while Rachel's three are in their teens.

"It was after having my second daughter that I discovered a more creative side to myself," says Vanessa, explaining what drew her to the three-year garden design course. "I really enjoy my job – I love working with people – but, in a way, it wasn't ticking my creative boxes either," agrees Rachel.

The course proved rigorous and jigsawing it with their other commitments wasn't always easy. "But our one day a week at college was our day, if you know what I mean? We loved it," says Rachel.

Vanessa's interest in gardening didn't develop until relatively recently: "My grandparents and my dad all enjoyed pottering in the garden and growing vegetables, but I didn't get into it at that stage. Though I have always had a thing for colour and texture – something which certainly comes through in our garden designs!"

Rachel began helping out in the family garden in her teens, and has tended her own plots and allotment on and off ever since. The first time she turned her hand to garden design, as opposed to more run-of-the-mill planting and maintenance, was

15 years ago: "For my mum's 60th, we gave her front garden a makeover.

"It was a surprise: just like the kind of thing you see on the TV! It was a very traditional front garden – laid to lawn, privet hedge – and we replaced it with gravel and lots of warm colour... She was very, very pleased. The designers still look much the same today."

While Rachel concedes that her own garden, in central Royston, is "in a transitional stage: the children have grown out of the climbing frame, so I'm just trying to work out what to do with it", Vanessa says she's "very lucky" with hers.

Living in half a converted school, in the Hertfordshire village of Radlett, her garden runs around three sides of the house. "It does have its challenges: it's pretty narrow

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Vanessa and Rachel's garden which won a Silver Gilt at Hampton Court this year



and completely enclosed, so there are no views. But I've experimented a lot with planting: when I started at Capel, they used to tease me about having a 'one garden', as in 'one of everything'..."

Viewing one of VaRa's completed projects – a domestic garden in Meldreth, where the pictures for these pages were taken – the friends' skill as plantswomen really shines.

Though they're happy to design plots from scratch, they're also adept at revamping or enhancing small or problem areas of an established garden – and that's exactly what they've done here.

Focusing on the area closest to the house, they've softened a wall, encasing the raised lawn, with planting; created a colourful pocket border in the patio; and injected interest in a gravelled bed – now home to the steel cube seats-come-sculptures which starred in their Hampton Court design. The tree-lined garden has a traditional, country feel – yet the cubes blend in beautifully. It's an inspired move.

Planted to provide year-round interest, flame-coloured crocosmia and ruddy heuchera are currently stars of this garden's show, along with plumes of miscanthus grass and judiciously kept seed-heads.

Both Vanessa and Rachel agree a good garden needs high-quality hard landscaping, which brings style as well as function to the table. Plentiful colour is another must: they have a particular soft spot for autumnal oranges through reds to purple. And plentiful texture too: architectural foliage plants are a favourite, ranging from jungly fatsia to elegant grasses.

As well as planting with succession in mind, so there's always something new coming through, the designers also like to create "moments: certain times when a particular corner or border comes into its own". Memories of a Capel Manor study garden, where tulips and alliums reached a joint peak, are a guiding example.

"Seating's another thing: a garden's not just something to look at, it's a place to be," adds Vanessa. "When we sat on the steps, leading down to the sunken centre of our Hampton Court design, we were immersed in the garden; totally surrounded by the plants. That worked far

better than I think either of us anticipated."

Constantly on the lookout for inspiration, Rachel cites Derek Jarman's coastal garden, down in Dungeness, among her favourite designs. Famously disparaging about the 'sterility of Modernism', the film director's garden is lush with naturalistic planting and features, including great hunks of rock, which stand proud on stretches of gravel. "Even though his style is very different from ours, I think it's the most beautiful garden – which works so perfectly with the surrounding landscape."

At the other end of the design spectrum, Vanessa is a big fan of Luciano Giubbilei, the Italian-born, Inchbald-trained designer behind 2014's Best in Show at Chelsea – the cutting-edge contemporary Laurent Perrier Garden, all sheer stone walls, close-clipped hedging and tight-palette planting. "His work is so modern; I just think he's a master at what he does."

With their client list growing all the time, thanks to word-of-mouth recommendation more than anything, Vanessa and Rachel are currently working on a diverse range of domestic projects, from a small town garden (which has to cater for two children and two rabbits) to a sprawling country plot (complete with swimming pool and its own field).

Keen to collaborate with property developers to make the most of new-build outdoor space, they would also love to create a public or community garden. "There is something therapeutic about being outside in the fresh air and surrounded by green; surrounded by beauty," says Vanessa. "It would be lovely to give that experience to a wider group of people."

It's clear, just from listening to them chat, that Vanessa and Rachel are round pegs in round holes. "In the last couple of years, we've done things we never thought we could or would do," says Rachel. "Moving into garden design has changed my outlook," adds Vanessa. "It's opened up a whole new life for me."

◀ VaRa Garden Design offers a wide range of services, from creating a planting scheme for a single border to designing entire gardens. An initial consultation is free within south Cambridgeshire and north Hertfordshire. For more information, visit varagarden.design.co.uk.