

# LET'S HEAR IT FROM VANESSA HOCH & RACHEL POCOCK

## VARA GARDEN DESIGN

FROM THEIR VERY FIRST PROJECT TOGETHER AT RHS HAMPTON COURT PALACE FLOWER SHOW, **RACHEL POCOCK AND VANESSA HOCH** HAVE GONE FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH. WE SPEAK TO THEM ABOUT THEIR AWARD-WINNING COLLABORATIVE APPROACH, RECENT RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW APPEARANCE AND WHAT THEY BELIEVE ARE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING GARDEN DESIGN

**N**either Vanessa nor Rachel had garden design down as their first career choice. But both came to it, nonetheless. Rachel, an orthopaedic physiotherapist working for the NHS, needed a creative outlet, Vanessa with a role in marketing needed a new challenge.

They both coincidentally came across the same course at Capel Manor College and soon discovered just how well they worked together as a team.

A competition held by Capel Manor College in conjunction with Provender Nurseries saw the two pair up for the first time. Though they joined forces because they were both short on time to get the entry submitted, their vision for the redesign of an area of planting was so successful that it led to an even bigger challenge – Hampton Court.

In 2015, Vanessa and Rachel undertook the design, build and planting of the Foundations for Growth Garden at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show. "It was a fantastic experience, but it was quite daunting. We had a small budget of £5k and Provender lent us the plants to use. We also didn't have a contractor," explains Vanessa. "We decided to centre the garden around education and getting your hands dirty. We invited hard landscaping students from Capel Manor College to help build the garden with us." It's a sentiment which was encapsulated in a quote from James Raffan etched on Corten steel within the ▶





garden: "Information alone can never become knowledge, and knowledge never becomes wisdom without some kind of rooting in the good soil of experience."

Winning Vanessa and Rachel a Silver-Gilt Medal, the pair felt they had truly found the recipe for success. "That was the first garden we had ever designed and built, and it was a show garden, and it got a Silver Gilt medal. We were thrilled," explains Vanessa. This wouldn't be their last foray into an RHS flower show either. This year, VaRa Garden Design was



commissioned by the RHS to create the site planting at Chelsea Flower Show. Borders included plants like *Crocsmia*, *Anemones* and shrubs like *Cotinus* and *Euonymus alatus*. Each bed featured woven arches and fences from WonderWood Willow.

The biggest change for this year was of course the season, but Vanessa and Rachel were able to take this in their stride. "We had to reassess the whole planting palette but Europlants, who helped with the plants, were really flexible and allowed us to pick and choose what looked good," explained Rachel. And, in the end, both enjoyed the change "It was really refreshing to have a different season to look at," shares Vanessa. "It was varied work as well. The planting is spread out throughout the showground and new areas were being added all the time, so we got to use a mixture of tall grasses and beautiful rich colours."

Both of these flower show experiences remain highpoints for Vanessa and Rachel, not just for the world recognised accolade, but also for their atmosphere. "Coming from the NHS, I definitely found most people are there for a common good and it feels a bit like that in this industry," notes Rachel. "Chelsea had the same

spirit as Hampton Court, with everyone pulling together to put on a show. I think that's what got us all those years ago. Just how friendly, approachable and supportive the whole industry is."

"Going through both the planting design competition and the show garden just showed us how well we work together, so we spent the next few years working part time at our other jobs while building this business," explains Vanessa. The two continued in this fashion for a few years until they decided they had to go full time in order to offer the level of service they wanted to. "We haven't looked back since," explains Rachel. "It's a lot about building your confidence around charging for your work when you're first starting out as well as valuing what you do."

Although the RHS Flower Shows are clear career highlights, the project which saw them win a Pro Landscaper Business Award for collaboration also stand out because of its meaningful brief. Commissioned by the charity Greenfingers, VaRa Garden Design redesigned a remembrance garden at Rainbows Hospice, which supports nearly 400 families with life-limited children and young people. Design touches included planting reflecting the

'rainbow' hues from the building's interior, a soothing water feature, and a beautiful new Remembrance Tree where families could commemorate a child they had lost by making their own personalised glass leaf.



It was always going to be an incredibly important space for families to visit, but what Vanessa and Rachel didn't anticipate was how much it would mean to staff, too. "It was a hugely humbling experience, a real privilege,"

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explains Vanessa. "It continues to have a long-lasting legacy."

"It was a lovely project to win the award for, because it truly was a collaboration between the charity, staff, glass leaf maker Lynn Jackson, Caltef Designs who created the remembrance tree and the landscaping team, Alfresco Landscaping," recalls Rachel.

It's clear to see that Vanessa and Rachel have come across a winning combination which easily extends to other teams, specialities, and clients. The two always work on gardens together, appreciating the skills each can bring to a design and understanding the importance of a fresh pair of eyes. "It's very much a case of two heads being better than one. It's good to have a sounding board", Rachel says. "We very often start off with a design and then collaboratively pare it down to get a strong, clean design that fits the brief."

As well as garden consultation and garden design, VaRa Garden Design also offers planting design and project administration and build.







Though not all clients want Vanessa and Rachel to undertake all these services, they recommend that this is how to get the best out of a project. "A big challenge for garden designers is getting clients to appreciate and understand the benefits of employing our services for the whole process," explains Vanessa. "When it's managed as a team, the client will get the best out of the design as well as the construction."

And this is, ultimately, the thing most important to the pair – as it is for all garden design companies – that the client is getting the utmost out of their space. Be that logistically or psychologically. A unique response to brief is crucial in achieving this, but while Rachel and Vanessa work to realise client's needs and wants, they also believe it's important to challenge. "There's a reason they've employed us. We want to challenge the client and get them to realise what they can actually get out of their space, to broaden their thoughts and add unique elements no one else will have," shares Vanessa.

For Vanessa and Rachel, creating these kinds of spaces is all about immersing clients in their gardens. Texture is also key, both through materials and planting: "Planting brings so much visual interest as well as tactile – it makes a garden come alive", Vanessa explains.

There are plenty of domestic projects under Vanessa and Rachel's belt bursting with this creativity. One such project turned out to be their steepest learning curve – literally. Urban Garden was a steeply sloping garden overgrown with some steep, uninviting steps that, in theory,

led the clients to the top of their garden. VaRa Garden Design replaced this with spacious platforms which lead to a dining patio. Surrounded by planting, these areas feel enveloped, and yet the overall garden has been opened to make the most of the view. "Getting our head around the levels, making sure it was useable and interesting, with a nice, relaxed journey up the garden – not the steep little steps that they had previously – was a real challenge," recounts Vanessa. "But we were happy with the end result and the clients absolutely love it."

And for Vanessa and Rachel, it's this variety of projects which they gravitate towards. Alongside a potential Chelsea Flower Show Garden in the

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near future, they have been picking up work with architects recently, where indoors and outdoors aim to work in harmony and landscape is considered from day one, as well as several wildlife gardens with minimal hard landscaping. But otherwise, it's simply onward and upwards for Vanessa and Rachel, as they continually build on the reputation which was established at that very first Hampton Court Garden.



- 1 Urban Garden – planting enveloped staggered platforms built onto a steep slope
- 2 RHS Chelsea 2021 – artisanal woven willow detail
- 3 Greenfingers' Rainbows Hospice Remembrance Garden – bespoke corten remembrance tree with glass leaves to reflect the lives of those lost
- 4 Rural Country Garden – generous borders match the grand scale of this newly built home
- 5 Contemporary Country Garden – the relaxed water feature is softened by *Achillea* and *Nassella tenuissima*
- 6 Country Courtyard – sustainable re-purposing of original materials to create a cosy sunny patio

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