



BE A FIRST-TIME SHOW-STOPPER

The annual BBC *Gardeners' World* shows – the Spring Fair, GW Live, and the Autumn Fair – offer great opportunities for student, newly qualified and more experienced designers alike to experience the excitement, pressure, and process of creating and presenting an exhibit for competition in a public-facing environment. **Barbara Segall** finds out more

The BBC *Gardeners' World* Shows, while offering exposure to a wide television audience as well as daily visitor footfall over several days, provide a relatively stress-free route into the show garden world.

With its emphasis on planting ideas for small or challenging spaces (the site must measure 96.8 square feet/9 sq m), the Beautiful Borders category is an ideal gateway to gaining competition expertise. The Showcase Gardens (at the GW Fairs) and full-sized Show Gardens (at GW Live) categories, meanwhile, call for more design and complex planning skills but advice and support is there (see page 28 to 31).

There are usually around 25 to 30 Beautiful Borders at GW Live, and 10 each at the Spring and Autumn Fairs. The organisers aim to have some 15 Show Gardens at GW Live and three to five Showcase Gardens, while the Spring and Autumn Fairs are likely to have two to three such gardens.

The application process is 'friendly and informal' say the Show's organisers, Bob Sweet and Lucy Tremlett, Horticultural Director and Head of Horticultural Division respectively for Immediate Live. Once entrants have applied, they have a 21-day window to submit their designs and

although there is often a broad theme set for each Show (particularly for the Beautiful Borders), Bob and Lucy stress that the Shows team wants each entry to have gardening interest in its own right.

The team is looking for visually appealing designs that are well executed and have a strong concept. Details of the assessment criteria are released during the entry process and all designers need to be sure they have met these criteria, otherwise they are marked down.

Ultimately, says Bob, 'our audience wants to ask questions, to learn from gardening professionals and enthusiasts and to leave with some tips and tricks to try at home and the show gardens and Beautiful Borders are visitor favourites.'

Time scale

The build-up period for the shows is not long – three full days for GW Fairs and four-and-a-half for GW Live – and everything then comes down very quickly, as soon as the shows close. Such a short timescale demands careful pre-show planning and co-ordination, but less time spent on site means less time spent away from the day job and family. →

Pre-registered SGD member Kim Parish's Fontana Show Garden (pictured) at GW Live in 2023 was awarded a Silver-Gilt medal.

Costs and support

Costs for the three categories of garden vary from show to show, with material support as well as finance that can be arranged through the Show organisers. For the larger gardens at GW Live, there are opportunities for designers to link up with landscapers who belong to the Association of Professional Landscapers. Many of these partnerships attract substantial grants (in 2023, up to £15,000). Some designers, meanwhile, approach the shows with their own materials support and sponsorship already in place.

The Show organisers want to help make each entry the best it can be. New for 2024, they are offering bursaries of £200 (to be spent on plants or props) for selected applicants to the Beautiful Borders category. There will be 25 bursaries available for GW Live and 12 each for the GW Spring and Autumn Fairs.

At all three shows, the Horticultural Team offers materials support for compost, hedging, turf, and paving, and substantial discounts for plants if purchased through an associated show supplier. It also arranges mentoring and makes available the wonderful ‘dancing diggers’, who work on each exhibit.

Awards

In the Borders category, awards are given for Best Beautiful Border and Best Interpretation of the Theme, and a People’s Choice is selected by the show visitors. Similar awards are made for the Show Gardens and the Showcase Gardens.

Assessment process

Ian Hodgson, a landscape architect and a former editor of *The Garden* magazine, is a member of the Assessor Team which judges the Beautiful Borders entries at all three GW shows. The category is, he says, an unrivalled opportunity for garden designers, novices in particular, to hone their skills in a gently competitive, public-facing environment.

The Borders are themed (in 2024, it will be Share my Space), to stimulate the designers’ ideas, and to engage the show visitors, and the Assessor Team will evaluate how closely the designers follow their own brief and the criteria for assessment. On the day of judging, the team will speak with the designers, to clarify anything that needs explanation, and then assess the entry. Feedback is given immediately and once every entry has been seen, results and medals are awarded.

Ian warns that following the brief and criteria closely is essential. ‘I also look for an overall quality finish; high-calibre planting, clean water surfaces, neatly trimmed turf, brushed paving and raised-bed edges.’ ◯

INSIDER KNOWLEDGE

As the deadlines to enter a GW Show in 2024 draw near, four previous winners share their experiences of creating a Beautiful Border, Showcase or Show Garden

SGD Student member Catherine Perry and co-designer Nikolai Attard raised funding through Crowdfunder UK to build their Where There’s a Willow Show Garden for 2023 GW Live.



Catherine Perry, SGD Student

SGD Student member Catherine Perry (@greengardencate) won a Platinum medal and Best Border for her Beautiful Border at GW Live in 2022 and a Silver medal for her jointly designed Show Garden at the same show in 2023.



- The application form and a very simple drawing are the starting points – you write your own brief to describe your garden.
- Read the assessment criteria document and stick to it.
- Getting feedback and having face-to-face conversations with show visitors was terrific. It is a great place to get your ideas across.
- The NEC site is very exposed, with little shade, so you need to provide shelter for the plants to look their best and protect anything that rabbits or other wildlife might want to eat.
- You will always need more plants than you think.
- Organise plenty of food and drink for you and your helpers.
- Pre-book accommodation as early as possible for helpers who are not local to the show, to minimise expenses.

Kim Parish

Pre-registered SGD member Kim Parish (landscapesofdistinction.co.uk) won a Gold for her first Show Garden at GW Live in 2021, and has since won two Silver-Gilts and the People’s Choice for Show Gardens at the same show in 2022 and 2023.

- Invest in splitters so you can share water with neighbouring gardens, especially at the summer show.
- Try to stay on budget – keeping a close eye on site delivery deadlines of work commissioned from outside contractors helps. I prefer to work with contractors I know rather than find someone who is local to the show as the latter will not always appreciate a deadline that is set in stone.
- Do not make block bookings if you need to book accommodation for several people; it can be expensive to amend if changes need to be made nearer to the show date.



Kim's Staycation Tropical Cornwall Garden won a Gold at GW Live 2021.

Nordic Retreat, designed by Luke Mills, won the Platinum Award at the GW Spring Fair 2023.



Luke Mills

Luke Mills (thelandscapeservice.com) won Best Showcase Garden and was the Platinum Award winner at the BBC GW Spring Fair in 2023. While not a novice designer, this was Luke’s first show garden for a BBC GW event.

- As we are based close to the show site (Beaulieu, Hampshire), we used local contractors we had worked with before, which was really handy when we needed something at the last minute.
- We were very focused on timing and



scheduling of the build. Who does what and in what sequence was key. A lot of the decking and stone cutting was done off site and stored at the studio until it was needed, and plants were ordered in advance and kept at our own nursery nearby. ➔

Lucy Chamberlain

Lucy Chamberlain (@HeadgardenerLC), a podcaster and garden writer, entered as a novice at the Autumn Fair in 2023 and won a Platinum medal and Best in Show for her Showcase Garden.

- You are well supported all through the process via site visits, presentations and through WhatsApp groups. The show organisers do their best to ease any concerns and often put you in touch with landscapers, plant suppliers and potential sponsors.
- Mentors are invaluable. Speak to your professional friends or ask organisations such as the Garden Media Guild for contacts.
- Keep an eye on budgets as they can quickly run away from you if you commit to something that is overly ambitious.
- It is important to follow all the guides given by the shows team and the assessors as this is where you can gain marks and win medals.

'THE SHOW ORGANISERS DO THEIR BEST TO EASE ANY CONCERNS AND OFTEN PUT YOU IN TOUCH WITH LANDSCAPERS [AND] SUPPLIERS.'



Lucy Chamberlain with her awards at the GW Autumn Fair in 2023, which she won for her Showcase Garden, An Edible Garden Through Time.



KEY DATES & CONTACTS

3 to 5 May 2024, BBC Gardeners' World Spring Fair at Beaulieu, bbcgardenersworldfair.com; Show Garden and Beautiful Border applications must be in by 23 January 2024

13 to 16 June 2024, BBC Gardeners' World Live at the NEC Birmingham, bbcgardenersworldlive.com; Show Garden and Beautiful Border applications must be in by 23 January 2024

30 August to 1 September 2024, BBC Gardeners' World Autumn Fair in association with English Heritage at Audley End House and Gardens, bbcgardenersworldfair.com; applications must be in by 2 May 2024.

For full information and details about how to enter, visit bbcgardenersworldlive.com/horticultural-opportunities or contact Lucy Tremlett, Horticultural Manager, lucy.tremlett@immediate.co.uk, 020 7150 5130.