

REAL GARDENERS

TALKING POINT



JINNY BLOM WONDERS WHERE ALL THE GARDENERS HAVE GONE

I love every aspect of my working life. Designing gardens is a challenging, stimulating business. Especially these days, as everyone, it seems, expresses a passion for plants and outdoor life. So why should this sunlit landscape be troubled by storm clouds on

the horizon? It is a pleasure to create a new garden with a receptive client. Landscape contractors are, in the main, thoughtful people with strong currents of creative ability. In recent years I have discovered a breathtaking array of skills that allow one to take greater creative steps in each successive design. Invariably someone, somewhere, can weave metal or build grottoes, find the perfect timber solution or make water do unimaginable things.

But, and it's a very big but, who can prune the wisteria? Who can get to grips with the vagaries of the genus *Ranunculaceae*? Who can identify the early signs of box blight and deal with it? I have found myself saying, with a mounting sense of hysteria, to a garden maintenance contractor in London: "What I want to achieve is a core of mounded box with a subtle weaving of astrantia and annual larkspur through the panicum." He thinks I'm mad. The storm is brewing and the first ominous drops are falling on the newly minted garden. Where have all the gardeners gone?

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And I refer to professional gardeners. It is unrealistic to assume that everyone who wants a garden is a gardener. Most people who retain a designer are already in the bracket that permits them to employ a gardener. I can candidly say that there are very few real gardeners around. I am utterly reliant on

Mark Todhunter, and his company Flora Arcana, to look after my gardens.

More worrying still is the absence of practical horticultural courses. Even the RHS are downplaying horticulture in favour of more 'sexy' subjects. Kudos goes to design courses yet no praise is heaped on practical horticulture. We must try and redress the balance. Apprenticeship is really the best method of learning, yet rarely practicable these days – particularly since the downgrading of the Parks Departments to slash-and-burn vans.

Without a rapid infusion of committed, skilled, enthusiastic, well-paid and appreciated gardeners, the whole industry of garden design is in danger of imploding. The designer's tenure in the creation process is short. It is the gardener who remains, who makes the garden sing. True, this is a service industry, yet it is clearly an art form as well. There is little difference in status between a gardener, an actor or a musician, in my view. In any area there are those happy with the chorus line and those destined to be virtuoso soloists. Every effort should be made to promote the art of gardening. If we let it die we will all be the poorer.

