

# Dynamic Planting For Public and Garden Spaces

Wednesday 22 September 2010

**Matthew Wilson**, Channel 4's Landscape Man will be speaking at Palmstead Nurseries Soft Landscape Workshop 2010. He took time out of his busy schedule to take part in a Q&A on the future of public spaces in the UK.



As the Associate Director of Design at the Landscape Agency Matthew Wilson has worked with the RHS, National Trust and English Heritage and during Matthew's ten year tenure at the Royal Horticultural Society he held the position of Curator of Hyde Hall, Essex and Harlow Carr.

# Q&A

What's your view on the state of public spaces in the UK today?

"Public landscaping and public green spaces in this country have never really recovered from the invidious Compulsory Competitive Tendering introduced in the 1980s by the Conservative government. And the absolute insistence that the winning quote was the lowest quote given has shafted our public landscaping".

Do you think that there's a danger that the new government cuts will further damage our public spaces?

"Until there's recognition at a high level that green space has a significant impact on our behaviour, and until it's properly funded then we're always going to be going round in circles and scratching for scraps at the table. In the industry, we know that good quality space has a regenerative impact on communities, but this needs to be properly recognised by agencies and the government".

Do you think landscaping is an afterthought in development?

"Yes, often. If it's an afterthought; something tacked on at the end and not properly funded then the landscape architects are always struggling to cover costs and so in order to make a profit on the job they resort to a tried and tested formula. The same old landscape gets churned out – the same formula. It's not the fault of the landscape architecture industry it's down to the lack of money applied to the whole process. In Scandinavia there's something like 10% of the total cost of the development applied to the outside environment. You'd struggle to find a development in the UK where that overall cost has been applied to the landscape".



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What are your favourite contemporary public spaces?

“There are some fantastic spaces in North America and mainland Europe where they have a more progressive approach to designing public spaces. In Germany, in particular, and in Canada in general, there are some great developments; The Toronto Music Garden, Thijssepark in Amsterdam, Columbus Park in Chicago and Tiergarten in Berlin are all great examples”.

Why do you think the Europeans and Americans do it better than us in the UK?

“I think it’s partly attitude and partly because elements of funding are enshrined as part of the planning process – it’s stipulated that a percentage of the overall development cost must be spent on landscape in Scandinavia – we don’t seem to have that and I think it would be a good idea; it’s the only way we’ll ever improve the quality of public landscaping”.

How do we get more dynamic public planting and dynamic spaces?

“We need to have confident and educated local councillors and local government officers, and confident educated landscape architects to carry out the work. When you see it integrated and done well, such as with Christopher Bradley Hole’s work at Highbury, then you get a fantastic piece of landscaping in a shared/public space that’s really very good. Barrier park and Mile End park are good examples of good new public landscapes”.

Would our public space planting be better managed outside the local authority?

“It’s a difficult question to answer. All the time it’s with the local authority there’s the possibility that there might be the opportunity to train people. Once it becomes a purely commercial enterprise then that possibility of the return of training goes. It used to be that the Royal Parks had a high level of training, but that’s not the case now. It’s unquestionably a bad thing that the training’s no longer there. There’s very little in the way of vocational opportunities for young people to get

into public gardening or landscaping and that has a direct impact on our green spaces. When I left college my first job was with a Watford Borough Council, it was post CCT but it still retained a degree of what went before with training, but by the time I'd left that had been stripped away. Back in the 1980s the Royal Parks training areas could be heard with squadrons of lawnmowers, you don't see that now".

### Do we really value our public space planting?

"I think again, there's no imagination in the thinking; on the one hand there's the intensive annual displays and on the other there's the lumpen dull porridge grey tedious masses of laurel all chainsawed into squares and there's nothing in between, and you end up with the ludicrous situations, like a few years ago, during our last drought. I remember driving to Ripon and passing a roundabout with a guy watering these pathetic looking beds and you think "Why? It's a roundabout that cars go by at speed, no one's looking at the space, they're speeding by". Why not just do something different with permanent planting. There are some great roundabout plantings in places like Norwich. It's also inspiring to look at the work of Dove Cottage Nurseries in Halifax who are working with the Local Authority to use more perennial planting; they've planted roundabouts with *Veronicastrum* and *Miscanthus*, prairie style planting, which is not only less intensive but also beautiful".

### Plans for future?

"I'm optimistic about the future, but to come out of the recession, it's going to require those of us in the industry to be a little more enlightened. One of the sad realities of the recession will be that there will be far fewer of us at the end than at the start. We need to come out of the recession (and it's easy to say this) and collectively attempt to raise the level of budgets by actually saying "no" to doing things for ridiculously small budgets. If enough of us said "no" maybe things would move on. We also need to use our imagination more and to develop more exciting schemes".

Matthew has been working with the National Trust at Mottisfont Abbey and Colby Woodland Garden and says despite having a specific remit, the National Trust have been open to trying something new. "The Trust's remit is concerned with heritage and conservation , but at Colby their woodland garden has been terribly affected by *Phytopthera ramorum*. It's been killing the rhododendrons and has led to a complete rethink of the space; the Phyopthera has changed the garden's reason for being there. We are working well with the Trust and the process itself is different and exciting'.

**Matthew Wilson** will be speaking at Palmstead Nurseries' 2010 Soft Landscaping Workshop on 22 September at the Ashford International Hotel.

Registration is now underway for the workshop at [www.palmstead.co.uk](http://www.palmstead.co.uk)



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