



Interview with Christine Walkden

Champion of
accessiblegardens.co.uk

Bella: Christine - we met when I was your student at Writtle College for the RHS Horticulture exam which I passed in 1996 - my goodness was it that long ago!

Christine: Yes - I remember!... You appeared very quiet but obviously wanted to learn. You generally asked sensible questions and I always enjoyed your sense of humour.

Bella: And you promised me that if ever I got to Chelsea you would help with the planting - and, although it was a design for a trade garden (Privett International) not a show garden, you still came!

Christine: I am a great believer in trying to help people. Lots of people have helped me in the past so I think it is important to help and support others if you can. We all have something to give and share, one of the nicest gifts is time, support and encouragement.

Bella: and since then you've supported me in my work and through my oncoming disability - you even pushed me around at the Palmstead Horticultural Seminar in Kent last year. But you had already had experience of a wheelchair before that hadn't you ?

Christine: Yes, my dad was in a wheelchair towards the end of his life and I used to take him out. I must admit my first experience of pushing a 18 stone chap was interesting! Dealing with steps, curbs, gravel, soft grass and pebbles all caused me, and Dad, great problems. Anything uphill with even a slight slope was hard work. I tended to think of places to take him where it was flat so that I avoided the problem in the first place. The number of times we got stuck just by him sinking into soft ground were numerous.

I remember trying to pull him out on a lawn in one of the parks in Blackburn and in the end having to go and find two chaps to help me lift Dad, then get the wheel chair out of the ground; it had sunk 12" by the time I found someone! The two chaps and I then had to carry Dad in the wheelchair off the lawn. I think if I hadn't found someone he probably would have disappeared beneath the turf!

Bella: you have also worked with gardens for care? and people with disabilities?

Christine: I am the Patron of Together for Mental Wellbeing, a charity that deals with all issues of mental health, that tries to ensure that people can get back into society and their own homes as quickly as possible. I also work with schools and children who have physical disabilities along with older people who are finding just getting about and gardening difficult.

Bella: to be accessible, people running gardens open to the public need to think about the physiological as well as the physical aspects don't they?

Christine: Yes: a garden needs to put the mind at rest and be peaceful. That is not to say 'not existing', but confusion and disarray are not things that induce relaxation and reflection. Space must be allowed for ease of movement: a wheelchair needs a wide turning circle for easy access - not just the 1,2 metres allowed for in the DDA Act.*. Psychologically, there need to be space around a person in a chair- imagine that you are with a person who comes too close to you, how uncomfortable that is, well that is what it can be like in a crowded garden or space. Also remember at Palmstead when someone came eat talk to me and spoke over you without including you by eye contact or anything!

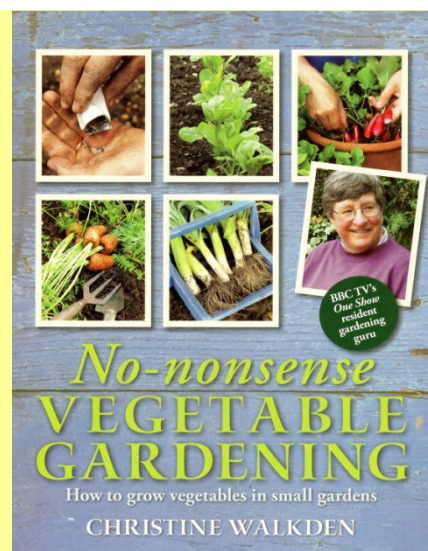
Bella: Yes - most people don't do that - it is uneasiness of course perhaps embarrassment, but that doesn't make it any more pleasant for me! And of course or parts of gardens can be accessible, and we have to understand that.

Christine: I agree - especially when it is an historic garden with deliberate hills or Edwardian steps. But visually, they could be accessible. at least to make a resting place with a view across a garden - so as not to leave a feeling of frustration or lack of fulfilment

Bella: and your other work?

Christine: The rest of the time I have available is spent lecturing, training, carrying out consultancies, leading garden tours and botanical tours around the world, broadcasting on TV - I am the resident Gardening Expert on *The One Show* and am a panel member on BBC Radio 4 *Gardener's Question Time*. I also take part in the BBC TV coverage of the Chelsea Flower show and film other short events that interest me....

see Christine on Chelsea coverage this year... and try her new book - out now!



No-Nonsense Vegetable Gardening

by Christine Walkden
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