



QEF Garden for Joy , RHS Hampton Court 2013, rebuilt at QEF residential home for disabled young people, Designed by Heather Appleton and Bella D'Arcy Reed.
Photo credit: QEF

From a disabled garden designer, by Bella D'Arcy Reed

Those of us who cannot go to Chelsea because of limited mobility rely on the BBC to convey to us the excitement, the colour, the plants, the designs. But this year it was marred by the comment by Joe Swift when he was talking to Chris Beardshaw about his rooftop garden for the parents of children at Great Ormond Street Hospital: *'it doesn't have to be accessible, wheelchair-friendly and all that business'*. What? A semi-public garden? Are parents all able-bodied then?

This thoughtless comment, sadly, conveyed contempt not only for people with disabilities but for the whole ethos of making gardens accessible: to people with disabilities, to elderly people – to people with push chairs come to that. Sadly, because Swift has been involved many community projects and indeed interviewed me on the accessible garden I co-designed with Heather Appleton at 2013 Hampton Court that has since been rebuilt at a residential home for disabled young people.



The opening QEF Garden for Joy , RHS Hampton Court 2013, rebuilt at QEF residential home for disabled young people, Designed by Heather Appleton and Bella.
Photo credit: QEF

And it was made during a programme that featured wheelchair-bound garden designer Mark Lane.

It was as if 'all that business' got in the way of good design, as if it was irksome to have to consider it. Many of the show gardens seemed to be inaccessible to people-on-wheels. Fine. They aren't open to the public. They are pieces of art, meant to be looked at from the sides, perfectly crafted, the catwalk models which are, hopefully, to be admired. To show the designer-as-artist at the top of her/his game.



The Italian Garden, Red House, Essex. Maintained by people with disabilities. Designer: Bella D'Arcy Reed Photo credit: Bella D'Arcy Reed

It's quite another matter for gardens open to the public. Yes I know historic gardens have places where people-on-wheels cannot go, and we accept that. New gardens should always be accessible – with pathways and viewing points – and audio-description days for the visually-impaired. New public buildings have to be accessible by law, why not gardens? In an earlier programme, Monty Don emphasised the health-giving properties of gardens and gardening, so even more important, then, that gardens should be accessible.

It is easy for the able-bodied to ignore the half-inch step that stops a mobility scooter in its tracks, or causes a wheelchair to be turned round (if there is a companion to do it), they just step over it. The able-bodied don't think about it, as I didn't until I got involved in gardens for people with disabilities, residential homes, public pocket parks, and then became a scooter-user myself. So I know it is a question of education, and thought. Garden designers think: we plan, we make lists of requirements, we have restrictions like trees that can't be moved or awkward corners. So you would imagine that providing good access is part of the thinking, something on which we advise clients just as we advise on drainage, on suitable plantings, hard landscaping.

Hard landscaping – ah yes! Long paths, gravel: it's cheap, I know. But unmotorised wheelchairs can't hack it – even with a friend – try hauling a sixteen stone person in a chair – you'll get about a metre. Gravel isn't all that good if you're visually-impaired either. Scooters can cope – just – but the embarrassment of making such a noise in a quiet place is very off-putting. It is easy to provide wheelchair-width paths, but if you don't provide a wider turning place at the end, we will fall into a flower bed, and not be able get out: not only is embarrassing but damaging for the plants. I recently visited a website for a new-built garden with a large conservatory containing delicious things which tells you that it is not suitable for wheelchairs because the paths are of gravel. I felt (unreasonably?) offended. I had wanted to see those delicious things. Couldn't they have thought about an accessible path to that conservatory and costed it in (and increase their foot – ahem! -wheel-fall?)



Abbotsbury, Dorset. Nicely signed, wide paths, just needs brushing to get rid of large stones. Photo credit: Bella D'Arcy Reed

Is it so hard to design a way round the garden that is easy for wheels? (It helps with heavy wheel-barrows too). Is it so hard to find and ask a person-on-wheels to accompany you around an existing garden or park to make comments and suggestions about changes that could be made? The hedge that overshadows the path which can be brushed past by upright people, but slaps people-on-wheels in the face? The ramp up to the tea room which ends in a half-inch threshold? The disabled toilet with a heavy door which can't be held open on one's own, and the one behind a door marked 'please mind the step'? (Yep, true!) Many parks, sad to say, don't have blue badge parking next to them. Mini-buses have to unload everyone at once and block the entrance.



Boleyn Park, Chelmsford. Wide paths to seat either side of sculpture, with space either side of seat, designed by Bella D'Arcy Reed

Accessibility should be part of the thinking of a designer as obvious as drainage and planting. It isn't a 'right' that people with mobility problems should be able to access gardens, it's a question of humanity. Some can walk some can't, so what? It doesn't make us alien, it doesn't make us invisible, it shouldn't make us ignorable. Is it in the garden design curricula, the syllabuses for diplomas? If not, it should be.

Don't bar us from gardens for lack of thought. Beautifully designed gardens are not just about the atmosphere, the careful plantings, the sound of water, they are about being able to see them, hear them, breathe them, travelling through them whether on foot or on wheels.



Bella D'Arcy Reed

Bella in Rome, after her scooter has been carried up steps by a fully-costumed Roman soldier.

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