

INSIDE RACHEL BAILEY GARDEN DESIGN

RACHEL BAILEY IS DETERMINED FOR HER DESIGN PRACTICE TO BE AS GREEN AS POSSIBLE AND FOR THE TEAM'S PROJECTS TO HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The more you put into a professional body, the more you get out of it. That's why Rachel Bailey has joined the Society of Garden Designers as its sustainability officer, having recently become a registered member of the

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association. She has also joined the APL's sustainability working group.

“We've got to work together across professional organisations and as an industry

to provide support, guidance, resources and education to help designers and landscapers to run more sustainable businesses as well as creating lower impact gardens,” says Rachel. “Now is really the time for joined up thinking so we can address the climate emergency, the biodiversity crisis and the over-consumption of natural resources.”

Rachel herself is striving for her business to be as sustainable as possible. The Scotland based garden design practice has had an environmental policy in place for years, which sets out its approach to each project it undertakes. It aims to create gardens with a low environmental impact but a positive contribution to biodiversity, for instance, as well as to minimise carbon emissions and waste.

Travel is also kept to a minimum – presentations to clients tend to be via an online meeting and site visits are out of necessity; otherwise, onsite photos are sent through regularly. The office has a green energy supplier, and the business uses a bank which has strong environmental and ethical principles.

Taking this further, Rachel intends to create an environmental action plan for the



THE TEAM

business, putting together a strategy with the help of consultants to figure out how to address the more difficult aspects of becoming a greener business.

A long-term interest in sustainability and the environment is partly what led Rachel to garden design, having previously worked as an academic scientist in a variety of subjects, starting in zoology and then carrying out a PhD in environmental toxicology. “Like a lot of people, it started with getting my own garden and becoming interested in shrubs and flowers, but also edible plants and growing my own vegetables. I ended up doing a permaculture design diploma – it wasn't all garden design based, but during that process I really loved that side and wanted to learn more.”

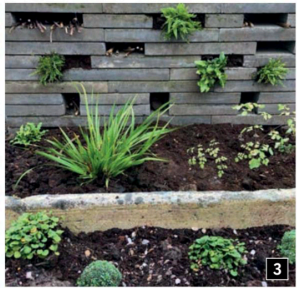
This led Rachel to training at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, which she says ▶

1 Design and photograph by Rachel Bailey MSGD



introduced her to the vast range of plants which can thrive in Scotland.

"We're very far north, on the west side of Scotland, so it's cold, but we have this east/west divide in terms of the climate. You can grow plants which some people might not consider could be grown this far north and which could never be grown on the east side, for example. So, it opened my eyes to what can be grown in Scotland and appreciate how the environment can change from one part to another. It's a combination of what can be grown here and the natural landscape of Scotland – the mountains, the coastline and temperate rainforests that highly influence my style."



Straight after graduating from the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in 2015, she set up her own studio in the area and joined the SGD and the APL for guidance and to build a network. "When you're working on your own, you need something to give you a feel for where you are in the wider scheme of things. You can learn so

much from other people, and hopefully I'm giving back to other people, sharing information and knowledge too, so professional standards can increase across the board."

Becoming a registered member of the SGD recently is a proud achievement for the

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designer. "It's given me loads of confidence knowing that my work has been scrutinised by experienced garden and landscape designers and that my work is of a high professional standard, and hopefully it gives clients confidence too that we know what we're doing."

Over the last few years, she has noticed that the idea of having a garden designed has increased in Scotland and budgets are potentially increasing along with this. "The pandemic has had a massive impact on people having a greater appreciation of outdoor space and with more people working from home, we're probably seeing the effect of this as well. After the first lockdown, a lot of people wanted

to do something with very little money, but this seems to have died down and we're left with the people who are really serious about designing and upgrading their gardens."

As Rachel's work has picked up over the years, she began working with freelancers to help with the planting on some of her projects but decided that it might be easier and more beneficial to work with those with a vested interest in the business rather than running their own. So, Rachel decided to go down the employment route.

"Marissa [Carrara, Assistant Designer] came as a student. She put a call out asking if anyone wanted any help. I had a small, relatively straightforward job that I knew I could oversee, so she came to do some work with me on a voluntary basis and then I took her on as an employee."

For the first year, Rachel took advantage of Scotland's Business Gateway, a publicly funded service which offers a range of resources for businesses, including grants and HR support, which eased the jump into being an employer.

Marissa joined the practice as Scotland went into its second lockdown. "That was quite a challenge, but if someone can start a new job, learn the business, work with somebody new, all remotely, it says quite a lot about a person."

Katie [O'Neill] works part-time on planting and aftercare. She came through recommendation having worked voluntarily in a local hospital's garden. Both employees are career changers, like Rachel. Marissa worked in the film industry as an assistant director and Katie is a trained medical doctor. "There are an awful lot of transferrable skills. For example,



Katie loves working with people, which is fantastic and understands the therapeutic benefit of gardens to people; garden design, at the end of the day, is about the plants and the environment but it's hugely about people."

Utilising the team's skills, both horticultural and otherwise, Rachel says the studio is looking to build on its aftercare offering, not so much because of a growing demand but because it's such an important aspect. "A garden is a living thing; it will change and develop, and I want to be involved in that development. The best way to be involved is being part of the aftercare team."

"It started with giving advice and meeting up with clients, having a genuine interest in how the garden has settled in and is progressing in the first year, so I'd always pop by for a quick look. But now I'm actually selling this as a service; we can give advice and give the client confidence.



So, it's been progressive; people don't put enough value on aftercare of gardens, so it's trying to reverse that."

The projects Rachel Bailey Garden Design undertakes are across west and central Scotland, and vary from small domestic gardens to large estates, from commercial projects to pro bono work for the community. They all have one thing in common, though – they are all plant-filled and offer habitats for wildlife.

"I've been involved in environmental and sustainability groups within my own community since 2010; we set up a local 'transition town'. As I've gotten more established and more confident, I've spent more time researching how we can create gardens that not only have a low environmental impact, but which positively enhance the environment. I'm still learning, but from my research and discussion with others, I try to design more sustainable gardens."

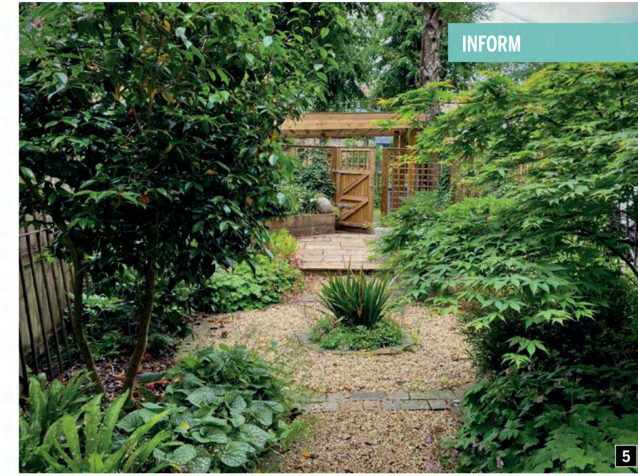
About three years ago, Rachel was asked by the SGD to be a regional co-ordinator for Scotland along with fellow designer Becca Duncan from Blossoming Gardens. Both were eager to offer a CPD day on sustainable design, so organised a day for this to go ahead – then the pandemic hit.

"It actually gave us an opportunity. It gave us a bit more time to find out more information and we ended up taking it online instead, which

meant we could reach a much wider audience and have speakers who would not have been able to do it had it been an in-person event."

Sharing information and ideas is a big driver for Rachel taking on the role of sustainability officer at the SGD. But as well as helping associations, there are plenty more immediate changes the industry can make to help in the climate emergency, including carefully considering what is being put in a garden and what is being taken out. "It's about being more mindful of the impact you're having and asking questions about products you're specifying. Don't be fobbed off by greenwash or businesses saying they're offsetting their carbon footprint but continuing business as usual."

One useful tool is Pathfinder, a carbon calculator. There are limitations to this. ▶



- 2 Carriage Lodge. Design: Rachel Bailey MSGD
- 3 Cotcastle: reused pavers. Design: Rachel Bailey MSGD
- 4 Gold medal winning long border at RHS Chatsworth 2019. Design by Rachel Bailey MSGD and Nicola Sweeney
- 5 West End, Glasgow. Design: Rachel Bailey MSGD
- 6 West Coast, Scotland. Design: Rachel Bailey MSGD
- 7 Gold medal winning long border at RHS Chatsworth 2019. Design: Rachel Bailey MSGD and Nicola Sweeney
- 8 Bearsden: reused pavers. Design: Rachel Bailey MSGD Photography ©Rachel Bailey Garden Design

admits Rachel, such as it not including other environmental impacts such as biodiversity and water management. "But it gives us a feel for what we're putting in and taking away from the garden and the impact of using one material over another and the amount of planting we're putting in. We know that planting, even if it's a grass lawn, can sequester carbon to a certain degree. The Pathfinder can also tell us how long it will take for the garden to become carbon positive, so sequestering carbon rather than have a negative impact."

Unfortunately, clients aren't always going to opt for these carefully chosen materials. "It's not always possible to convince them. Some clients are adamant that they want something like artificial turf in their gardens. I now have a blanket rule that I won't be putting it in, but I have had situations before where I have come up with every possible and sensible alternative that could be used, and I still couldn't get them to change their minds.

"The majority of clients come to me, though, because of the type of gardens I've designed. I don't tend to have people approach me who want wall-to-wall paving because all of my gardens are filled with plants. If clients do come to me with a less than sustainable idea, I will suggest alternatives and why their idea is not the best way of approaching something. As designers, we play a really important role in educating our clients and most are happy to go along with a sustainable approach but hadn't thought about it or didn't know. They see adverts for a particular product which leads them to believe they're doing the right thing,



but there is a hell of a lot of greenwashing which has escalated since COP26. Everyone's jumping on that bandwagon and so it's crucial that greenwashing is stopped, and that garden magazines and TV programmes step up and do their bit and are educating people correctly."

There are also a few misconceptions around sustainability too. Rachel cites a popular trend



she's spotted for repurposing old pallets and scaffolding boards. Whilst reclaiming timber is a positive step, you need to be careful of the type you're using, warns Rachel. "There is a lot of really good, reclaimed timber out there, so it's knowing what you're using and ensuring the right timber is being used for the right job. There's no point creating a garden that is going to fall to pieces or look tatty within a few years."

She says reusing materials in the garden isn't always the cheaper answer, either: "A lot of people think that reusing materials on site is

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a way of saving money, but that's often not the case because the material needs to be cleaned for it to be repurposed which takes time, skill and effort, so can end up costing more in labour. It's not a bad thing, but I just wouldn't sell reusing or reclaiming materials as a way of saving money. It won't cost less financially, but it will cost less on the environment."

Despite the wealth of knowledge Rachel has on sustainability, she's not an expert on Biodiversity Net Gain; however, we were still keen to hear her views, which is yet to include Scotland. "It could improve biodiversity as well as protecting biodiverse habitats, but only if the mitigation hierarchy is adhered to. So, to minimise impacting the biodiversity or habitats that are already onsite over restoration; with compensation or offsetting being a last resort.

From what she has seen on Biodiversity Net Gain, though, she does have some concerns around the process of the initial survey, where an expert will visit the site to ascertain the existing biodiversity. "This has to be scrutinised by independent experts, not the council which has a vested interest. There was a development built nearby recently where the initial environmental report had been carried out in January. The expert had stated that the report needed to be repeated as January is not a good time to do the assessment, but the box had been ticked. So, it would have seemed as though the site had little biodiversity, which is not true at all."

Rachel adds that the 30-year timeframe for looking after and monitoring the site post-construction is too short too, as habitats take time to establish, and that Biodiversity Net Gain should be chosen as well as other environmental benefits, not instead of other benefits. Quick and easy options should not be favoured over those which have a higher value to wildlife.

Whilst not an expert on sustainability – and, arguably, no-one is – it's crucial for the industry to have designers such as Rachel challenging initiatives to go the extra mile, and to have garden design practices such as Rachel's which are looking for further ways to go green and are willing to share this information as they discover it. As Rachel says, the more you put in, the more you get back.

9 Planting around existing pond. Planting design by Rachel Bailey MSGD

10 Cotcastle. Design by Rachel Bailey MSGD
Photography ©Rachel Bailey Garden Design

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