

Down to earth

JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR, PRESENTER, THE GREAT GARDEN CHALLENGE

The final of *The Great Garden Challenge* on 1 July is looming. The garden design competition programme has had its struggles since it began this spring (HW, 26 May).

Viewing figures of not much more than 50,000 forced a move from 2.15pm on weekdays to the more popular spot of 12.30pm.

Although the programme has not caught on as much as production company Princess hoped it would, it has made a TV star of affable presenter James Alexander-Sinclair.

The garden designer's relaxed style has been a highlight of the ill-conceived programme idea as he has managed to bring some personality to the screen, alongside fellow presenters including Chris Beardshaw and Janet Ellis.

For Beardshaw, it is "the biggest gardening challenge of my life", having left ratings leader *BBC Gardeners' World* this year after Monty Don clung on to the top job for this season.

Beardshaw accepted a job filming a programme in the vein of Jamie Oliver's *Fifteen* project, intended to introduce students and unemployed people to gardening. But the move seems to have backfired as the BBC reassesses its gardening schedule. Ubiquitous garden designer and TV presenter Diarmuid Gavin appears to have got the job. The channel could have done worse than to give it to Alexander-Sinclair.

In *The Great Garden Challenge*, 64 teams of mostly professional garden designers compete over three days to build the best £3,000, 25sq m show garden at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.

Alexander-Sinclair is one of the judges, alongside Beardshaw and Anne Marie Powell. The series went interactive halfway through, with the public having a say in who is best. During the 15 weeks the show is on air, 120 small gardens are being built.

Alexander-Sinclair is sanguine about the programme's lack of success in attracting viewers: "I think it's a very exciting idea to have that many small gardens in one place — it's quite inspirational for people. Some you like,



some you don't like. People ask: 'Is that really a garden?'

"There's a certain amount of jeopardy — some are very good, some are OK and some are not very good. Blenheim's a fantastic place to do it. There's a mix of competition, design and practice. It's plant-driven and open to anyone, so you can see what we're doing. That's not something you get everywhere."

But high-end garden designers have attacked the programme, billed as the latest innovation in gardening TV, as being unhelpful to the profession.

Designer Sally Court criticised the programme in May at a debate on the future of TV gardening at the Urban Gardens show in London. She said: "The Great Garden Challenge is a bit of fun but it doesn't mean anything to the profession. It's not meaningful gardening."

Court admits she charges more than most designers and is worried about an influx of cheaper competitors coming into the business: "The price has to be driven down to a degree so the average person can afford a garden designer, but that's going to backfire, with people not being willing to pay your hourly rate, even with a higher media profile."

CV

1984-1992 Garden contractor, Terra Firma Landscapes, London

1992-date Garden designer, Towcester, Northamptonshire

1992-date Journalist for *Daily Express*, *Sunday Express*, *Homes & Gardens*, *Period Living*, *BBC Homes & Antiques*, *House & Garden*, *Country Living Magazine*, *BBC Gardeners' World* and *GardenLife*

1999 Bronze medal for *Daily Mail* Horticulture garden, RHS Chelsea Flower Show

1999-date TV, including *Collectors' Lot*, *The Curious Gardeners*, *Small Town Gardens*, judge for *BBC Gardener of the Year 2003*, *Great Garden Challenge 2005*

2004 Hole in the Ground garden, Westonbirt International Garden Festival, Gloucestershire

Alexander-Sinclair admits: "There are an awful lot of us. Quite a lot of garden designers actually aren't very good."

But he defends the programme for making gardening popular: "It's show gardening, like any flower show. The difference is that if you get through to the quarter-finals, you have to have another idea. If you're through to the finals, you have to build four gardens."

He says: "Real gardening in back gardens is very personal. The garden virgin needs a leg up — and that's what garden design is. It's not about starting from fresh, it's about tweaking that bit over there. That's the skill of the designer."

The appeal of the programme to Alexander-Sinclair is that "not everyone can do a garden at Chelsea, but you can do it at Blenheim and say 'my garden's been on TV — I'm a garden designer'."

But do garden design shows produce real designers? Alexander-Sinclair, who has no formal design training, says: "Not everybody can do it, just as not everybody can be a pop star."

"TV programmes give a false impression of how much things cost. But any gardening on TV is a force for good."

By Matthew Appleby