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James is a luxury item



■ James Alexander Sinclair in his ever-developing garden near Towcester. The contrast between modern industrial – his metal pond and planters – and the old farm buildings, softened by planting, was his aim, although he admits it hasn't been to everyone's taste. CE pic by Louise O'Callahan 070306LOC53

“Garden designers are a luxury product,” laughs the garden designer James Alexander Sinclair when I ask why so many seem to be, er, well, posh.

“You can only really have one if you can afford one. But that does tend to give the impression of designers being a bunch of poncey ponces, which of course, many of us are.”

The charismatic gardener, journalist and TV presenter has lived in south Northamptonshire for the past 14 years, with his wife Celestria and children Archie, Stroma and Maxim.

His public persona – complete with that trademark hat – is witty, chatty and often brutally honest.

His obvious relish for performing (he wanted to be an actor) is evident from his popularity as a public speaker, television and radio panelist and now ‘stand-up-gardener,’ on tour with fellow gardener Nigel Colborn. (Nearest venue: Cheltenham).

In person, he's a lot less bouncier than I'd braced myself for. The poshness is genuine – son of a military man, public school, etc. But he's utterly charming, and not in slightest bit snotty – unlike some other telly gardeners I've interviewed. He's forthright in all his views – especially on his fellow designers:

“There are too many of them.

Anyone can do a course and call themselves a designer. But you do actually have to know what you're doing, even if it doesn't look like you ever get your hands dirty.”

James will happily admit he got into the business “through bluff and bluster”, when his sister, tired of his chosen career of loafing around, made him dig her garden.

His first proper job was to prune a house-high honeysuckle. he hacked it down to two feet.

This led to a formative education in landscaping, digging holes and putting up fences, and over the years he learned his trade through experience.

He has a favourite phrase about garden design: “You can be a gardener without being a garden designer – but you cannot be a garden designer without being a gardener.”

While he'd happily admit to avoiding getting his hands too dirty at work (“My job is to see things client cannot see, not just to dig holes where they want

them), at home things are very hands on.

He's constantly changing his garden – new this season are the stark metal pond (not given the thumbs up by the audience of ladies at a recent talk) and an extra border.

Last year some wooden steps were installed as he hated mowing on a slope, and he'll happily change his planting regularly. The as-yet un-renovated outhouses are filled with huge compost heaps – recently turned. One, he tells me, is destined to be a fernery, designed by his teenage daughter.

His garden is lovely, even in winter.

You can see the importance of structure with his ‘grass snake’, some random yet formal upright beech trees, and his metal pergola made of scaffolding – its not your usual country cottage garden.

He's also having fun further up the road, at the glorious Cottesbrooke Hall near Northampton.

This is where he has recently re-designed the historic house's terrace border and is looking forward to working at the estate again. Other jobs in his rather busy week include sorting columns for *Gardener's World* magazine, visiting clients as far afield as France and Scotland, and updating his vast website, complete with blog.

But as a designer, where do you start on private jobs?

“If you turn up and they say, ‘right, I want this here and that there’, then I'd probably run,” says James. “You can't be arrogant enough to ignore the client's wishes, but the point of designer is to look at the potential. To ask, what do you want it for, who will use it? How often? And then you can start imagining how it will look in 10 years.

“So many people get hung up on preserving their plants and gardens exactly the same for many, many years. Yet it should be far more dynamic than that. That's what makes it fun.”

And speaking of fun, he's gearing up for his stint as presenter at the Malvern Spring show, where among other appearances, he will be compering a debate on who makes the best gardeners, men or women? As I launch into a tirade he laughs. “yes, that's the kind of reaction we're hoping for!”

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