

COMPANY PROFILE

Patricia Fox is managing director and founder of award-winning garden and landscape design practice Aralia. She tells Pro Landscaper about the eureka moment that led her down the big-budget path and says when it comes to creating the perfect small business, size matters

How was the company was founded?

When I first started designing gardens I knew that I didn't want to do it on my own, that it

would be more fun with people. I suppose that's why I didn't name the business after myself, I named it after a Japanese Angelica tree.

I'm quite a good marketer – I wanted a name that wouldn't become dated or put me in a box. I chose an 'A' because it's the beginning of the alphabet and could therefore easily be found in directories. I started going to a

networking group called Business Network International (BNI) to branch out into more adventurous gardens and keep up-to-date with business techniques and legalities. I met someone from ActionCOACH, and began attending a group coaching course, which was brilliant. I remember driving home after a session where we'd been asked what exactly we wanted to do, and I suddenly laughed out loud because I realised I wanted to design gardens



for the rich and famous! Although it was lovely doing small gardens on a budget, they lacked the chance to be really creative. I knew I'd get bored if

I carried on doing £7K gardens.

That's when I decided I wanted to do Chelsea and enter awards. It was a pivotal moment that sent me in a whole new direction.

How has it developed since?

We moved into new premises in 2011, as there were three of us working in my home by that point.

There's now six of us, and I'm not

desperate to grow beyond this. The more people, the further away I get from design work, and that's the part I love. I have a lovely team at the moment – associate Alistair Henderson has been with Aralia for five years now. He's really talented.

We now offer both garden design and landscape architecture. After RHS Chelsea 2012, I received a call from St George, a mix-use developer of the Berkeley Group. Chairman Tony Pidgley had been on our garden and was insisting

that I go and meet the team.

I ended up meeting them at 7pm on a Friday and they commissioned Aralia to design 11 rooftop terraces. They kept calling me a landscape architect, which I didn't bother correcting them on because I didn't know what the term meant! I now have three landscape architects working for me. I quite like the idea of having a multi-disciplined team with different approaches – it allows people to think outside the box.



Patricia Fox

ARALIA in numbers

Established **2004**

Employees **6**

Awards

RHS Chelsea: 2 Silver Flora
RHS Tatton Park: 1 Silver Gilt

SGD awards: 5

BALI awards: 5

APL awards: 1

How are the services Aralia offers managed?

It's all just one team. We considered separating it at one point, as we also design lighting and irrigation, and thought about recruiting someone specifically for this, but I see it as really important that everyone has a variety of work. Each member of the team gets the chance to do a little bit of everything. We offer both design and design and build using sub-contractors, so we looked at bringing in a contracts manager, but you learn so much as a designer from going out on site and the problems that can arise that you couldn't grow as a designer without this. I can't see that we'd ever do it differently, there are too many upsides at the moment for the individual and the company, but never say never.

Aralia also offers 'miscellaneous garden and landscape services'. What does this cover?

Miscellaneous services covers everything from sourcing furniture to commissioning bespoke sculptures – anything that relates to the external



2



3

space. We have a holistic approach to garden design, we prefer to choose the client's furniture for them. If there's a service we don't offer in-house, such as ecology or arboriculture, we will work with external consultants and bring it to the client as part of Aralia. It just makes it easier.

Which of the services takes the higher percentage in terms of work?

In hours, it would be design. There have been some years where we've literally done nothing but design work. We've started working with a lot of architects on new builds recently, many of which are Paragraph 55 houses. These houses must be of outstanding creative merit, and if the building has to be like that, then the landscape that's designed to accompany it has to be fairly amazing as well, and we love designing these.

What geographical areas do you cover?

Most of our business comes from London and the home counties, but since we took part in 'Ask an Expert' at Grand Designs Live in Birmingham last year we've had enquiries near there, including Leicestershire, Manchester and Shropshire. We have also worked on a couple of international projects, one in the Ukraine and another in Geneva.

What size projects do you normally undertake?

A typical project is around £100-150k. Having said that, we also work on larger and smaller projects.



5

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4

Most of them now take at least a year – some of these are ongoing phased projects.

Are the majority residential or commercial?

On the whole, they're probably 90% residential, as in the end result is a residential property, but the client could be a commercial developer. It's a mix, really. It's quite good working on the commercial side as well because it keeps us up-to-date in terms of regulations and best practice, which is really important.

Where do you see the company in five years time?

I don't want the company to be any bigger, I know that. If you'd asked me five years ago, my answer would have been different, but I like the size – I see no benefits for me or the company in expanding. I would like us to just carry on doing amazing gardens and landscapes. We're

genuinely lucky to be entrusted with the projects that we undertake. I have got a little itch for interior landscaping, that could be the next new trend, and basement gardens, looking at maximising small spaces as gardens are getting smaller. We designed our first roof terrace in 2012, and have done many more since. It's a trend that will definitely continue, and we've been lucky to be at the forefront of that.

Finally, what is the one thing you think the industry could and should do better?

One of my biggest bugbears about the industry is that there's no real network for helping new designers coming out of college. It's such a fragmented industry. Probably around 95% of garden designers work individually, so there aren't many ways for them to seek help and training. Some of the colleges try to be more commercial such as The London College of Garden Design, but there isn't anything to help designers get from A to B. We have an intern with us at the moment, and are looking to take on another intern. It's a six-month unpaid internship, which I know not everybody can afford to do, but they get amazing training – it's beneficial for us, and at least we're helping in a little way.

- 1 Chelsea Creek
- 2 Essex Country Estate
- 3 Ganton Street Roof Terrace
- 4 Knightsbridge Roof Terrace
- 5 RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2012

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