

Let's Hear it From BELDERBOS LANDSCAPES

Belderbos Landscapes celebrated its tenth anniversary this year, with a party in London for all its staff and invited guests during the week of RHS Chelsea Flower Show. They're a dedicated and hard-working team, and Pro Landscaper met up with owners Ed and Claire Belderbos to find out the secret of their successful business

How did the company start and when?

Ed: I studied Landscape Architecture for five years at Manchester Metropolitan University which involved studying in Germany and a year working in Nottingham City Council's Landscape Design department. I really enjoyed my studies, but had always wanted to join the army – so I went to Sandhurst before joining the Royal Anglian Regiment for five years. After leaving the army, I worked in the City, but it wasn't the right thing for me long-term. So when an army friend asked me to design their garden – I thought I would landscape it as well. Over a bank holiday, I blitzed their garden in four days, really enjoyed doing it and from then on, I knew I wanted to set up my own design and landscaping business.

“SOMETIMES WE'RE BUILDING ALL OUR OWN DESIGNED WORK AND OTHER TIMES WE'RE WORKING SOLELY FOR EXTERNAL GARDEN DESIGNERS”

I then started to do the odd bit of maintenance work for friends and colleagues. It became quite obvious on Monday mornings when I went to work what I had been up to at the weekends with soil ground into my hands.



Colleagues used to say to me, “More gardening at the weekend Ed?”

Claire: Gradually our flat was being taken over by more and more tools. Through word-of-mouth, Ed was then asked if he would design and landscape our first client's sister's garden, and after that a fellow colleague of hers. It just went from there and snowballed. Once Ed had three confirmed clients, he resigned from his job in the City and Belderbos Landscapes was born!

Ed: At the time, Claire worked for Deloitte. She returned home from work one day to tell me that a partner of the firm wanted me to design and landscape his large driveway in Berkshire. It was a

good size front garden and long driveway; I ripped the whole place apart and had to put it back together again. I was still working alone – so it was a case of drafting in labour wherever it was available, including help from some friends and ex-army colleagues. Claire had complete confidence in me. I took a lot of advice from friends on my degree course. One of those was Rupert Davis, who worked for Oakleigh Manor Landscapes and helped me tremendously with the design of this driveway. I remember the first time the digger arrived on site. Fortunately the digger driver gave me a crash course and the rest is history! →

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What stage is the company at now?

Ed: We now have up to 40 people working for us. Since 2009 we've employed an in-house designer – we really felt we needed this with several teams building at any one time. Sometimes we're building all our own designed work and other times we're working solely for external garden designers. We used to worry about whether that threw up a conflict of interest but when speaking to designers we work with, they say they are happy and it doesn't mean we are taking business from them. Quite often, it is a benefit that we have design as well as construction experience, as we are able to offer a different perspective on their designs. We always enjoy working with different garden designers.

How is your work structured?

Claire: Ed is very much the face of Belderbos Landscapes. He meets with clients, works closely with operations and our designer as well as having overall responsibility for quality control.

I have a marketing and sales background rather than having technical expertise. I am one of the only people in the company that hasn't worked on site! I am focussed on developing new opportunities such as working with new garden designers and developing relationships across the industry. I take a keen interest in managing and growing the maintenance side of the business and regularly liaise with the maintenance manager.

How did you take that step up in expanding your company?

Ed: Initially we only built our own garden designs, however it wasn't long before we started to build for other garden designers. Now we build regularly for several different garden designers and landscape architects including Sarah Eberle, Christopher Masson, and Sara Jane Rothwell amongst others.





How does the relationship work with the designers you work for?

Ed: We are flexible in our approach when working with all our different designers. Each designer has their own unique style and we adapt accordingly. It is about creating a positive relationship between the client, designer and us, as the landscape contractor. All landscaping projects are very much a team effort and it is important that a trusting relationship exists amongst all involved.

How do you win work?

Ed: We win work through client recommendations, through designers as well as enquiries through our website. We also undertake garden maintenance – so this often leads to landscaping work.

Claire: About 40 per cent of our maintenance clients are those whose gardens we have landscaped. We don't yet undertake a lot of commercial maintenance but this may be for the future and something that we would be interested in following-up. We are fortunate to have a committed garden maintenance manager, who has the right customer care and is very passionate about what he does.

How are your teams structured?

Ed: The landscaping teams each have a team leader, which are supported by an operations team. We have enthusiastic and experienced team leaders who I would like to continue to develop and grow within the business. We'd like to take on more apprentices and further invest in team leader training.

Claire: We have just invested in a two year training programme for our team leaders, with an external training provider. The training is not technical; it is all about people management, leadership and taking ownership.

Is there a worry that if you train the staff up they may then go off somewhere else?

Ed: You can get very possessive about your company but actually there is more to be gained from just doing it, rather than not.

Claire: We are fortunate to have a talented workforce with several staff who have been with us for many years – we really value this loyalty. We want our staff to appreciate that

their own performance and actions really do have an impact on the success of the business – every single person has the power to make a difference. Our first apprentice started with us last year and is doing really well. We ask for a positive, can-do attitude from all our staff.

“ **WE ALWAYS ENJOY WORKING WITH DIFFERENT GARDEN DESIGNERS** ”

What's a typical contract?

Ed: We landscape London gardens of about 5m x 8m, which cost between £15-20,000 to design and build, but we also work in the Home Counties in areas such as Marlow, Horsham or Ascot. These gardens are often larger with unique designs and provide continuous work for several months, if not years. We also landscape several roof gardens in Central London. We have just completed a roof garden in Clarks Green, designed by Sara Jane Rothwell.

Claire: Gardens in South West London in areas such as Richmond, Wimbledon and Putney are often larger, so offer more scope to vary the design and use different materials. It is very rewarding landscaping different gardens which present exciting opportunities and challenges.

How about specification of new products?

Ed: I really enjoy visiting trade shows like FutureScope where we can find some great new products that offer an alternative choice to what we may usually use.

Claire: We are loyal to our trusted suppliers, like The Palm Centre, Landscapeplus, Jacksons Fencing and London Stone who provide very good customer service and value, but it is essential that we keep up to date with new products and innovations. →

- 1 NW London garden. Designed by Christopher Mason.
- 2 Richmond garden. Designed by Belderbos Landscapes.
- 3 Chiswick garden. Designed by Anoushka Feiler.
- 4 Wimbledon garden. Designed by Sara Jane Rothwell.
- 5 Green wall in NW London garden. Designed by Sarah Eberle.
- 6 Belderbos Landscapes team, celebrating the 10 year anniversary.

And what are your growth ambitions?

Ed: We would like to develop relationships with more designers and grow the number of teams we have. As a consequence of having more teams we are able to offer greater economies of scale and flexibility. We are working towards our operations managers being given overall responsibility for the day-to-day running of the projects whilst ensuring quality is maintained. We continuously strive to emulate a philosophy of quality and value. We don't want to be elitist; we want to appeal to the client who seeks a quality product and excellent service. Our company culture is can-do, positive and professional.

Claire: The problem we have is keeping up with demand as we sometimes have to turn work down.

What do you think about the industry associations?

Ed: BALI is fantastic. A key piece of advice I was given when I started the business, was to join BALI and it has served us well. I have met some fantastic people through BALI and I have a huge amount of respect for the other landscaping companies that we sometimes tender against. If it wasn't for BALI, I wouldn't have met Brian from Outdoor Options and the rest of the Three Peaks Challenge Team.

What do you both like to do outside of work?

Ed: We have two boys aged eight and six whose activities take up lots of our time – mini rugby, cricket, camping and cycling, and just general family stuff.

Claire: I'm always saying Ed should have a hobby of his own and last year the 3PE cycling was great for taking him away from everything. It's hard to switch off when it's your own business!

ABOUT BELDERBOS LANDSCAPES

Belderbos Landscapes
The Palm Centre,
Ham Street, Richmond,
Surrey TW10 7HA

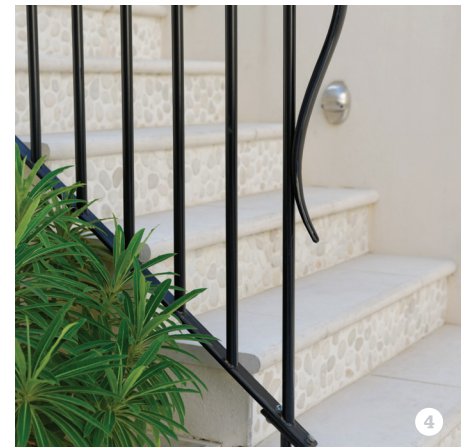
Tel: 020 8940 2832

Email: info@belderbos.co.uk

Web: www.belderbos.co.uk



“ WE WANT TO APPEAL TO THE CLIENT WHO SEEKS A QUALITY PRODUCT AND EXCELLENT SERVICE. OUR COMPANY CULTURE IS CAN-DO, POSITIVE AND PROFESSIONAL ”



- 1** North West London garden. Designed by Sarah Eberle.
- 2** Putney front garden. Designed by Belderbos Landscapes.

- 3** Children's adventure playground at Holy Cross Preparatory School, Kingston. Designed and built by Belderbos Landscapes.
- 4** Pebble mosaic step riser. Sofia Limestone, supplied by Sliverland Stone.