

SGD Student Checklist

Introduction

Garden design is competitive, with many people entering it as a second career. It is multidisciplinary and many consider it to be an applied art, requiring an understanding of how to create spaces that are not only aesthetically pleasing, but also practical and sustainable.

This list has been devised in consultation with experienced, accredited garden designers in the SGD. It is hoped that it will help you to assess the many garden design courses on the market and to choose one that best suits your time and finances, as well as the skills you need to acquire and the garden designer that you hope to become.

This is just a check list and it is not exhaustive. You would be well advised to discuss your plans with the relevant course tutors and also with students on the courses and also those who have graduated and are now working in the field.

The profession of garden design has evolved over many years, but it is only recently that specific garden design courses have been available. As a result, many respected and experienced designers do not have formal qualifications. However, the Society of Garden Designers recognises the increasing need for formal qualifications in order to uphold the highest standards of professionalism and provide the best services for the public.

Design Training

1. How many design projects are in the course?

There are so many aspects to learn about designing gardens, that sometimes the designing practice itself can be limited.

Look carefully at how many gardens are covered in the course, but also be aware that some tutors solve this problem by setting multiple design tasks, rather than just whole garden projects.

2. Are students given experience with presenting their design ideas and receiving criticism of their work?

In design practice you will have to pitch for jobs and present your ideas to clients. Learning to present your ideas verbally, to answer questions and accept criticism is all invaluable.

3. What is the percentage of time spent designing?

Looking at overall studio time is a good way of estimating how much design teaching you will get. This not only gives you practice at designing, under the supervision of tutors, but it also gives you a flavour of the working studio set-up.

4. Is there a variety of projects, sites and briefs?

You may already know what type of gardens you ideally want to design, but it is best to choose a course that gives you tuition in and experience of as many different types of garden as possible: large rural, small urban, sloping, difficult layout etc.

5. Does the course cover the following aspects of the design process?

- **Presentation plans and accompanying illustrative drawings**
You will need to present your ideas with drawings that illustrate the general ideas behind the garden, as well as the details within it.
- **Site surveying and analysis**
This should cover large, small and sloping sites. You should be taught to work with contour plans and spot heights and to understand site and land drainage issues.
- **Construction drawings**
Quality, detailed construction drawings are essential for the correct implementation of your designs. A professional garden designer will have the knowledge of hard landscaping materials and construction to be able to draw these and will be able to liaise with specialists, such as structural engineers, when required.
- **Specification**
As well as construction drawings, the designer is responsible for specifying the materials and correct construction processes and methods for the garden. Many courses teach the use of model specifications, and designers do use these, but if you design something original, you will need to write your own specifications and a course should arm you with the knowledge to be able to do this.

- **Setting out drawings**
Many courses do not cover this.
These are the drawings required by the contractor to accurately set out your design on the ground; translating it from paper to reality.
- **Planting Design**
How much time is given to teaching and practising planting design?
This is often the 'poor relation' on design courses, but it is difficult to learn and essential in design practice.
Are students taught about the maintenance issues involved with designing a planting scheme? A planting scheme is only as good as its longevity. It is very important to have a thorough knowledge of plant requirements and the maintenance requirements of a scheme over time.
Are students taught and tested in plant identification?
Regular plant identification teaching and testing will help you to build up the necessary extensive plant portfolio that you will need.

The Business of Design

- 1. Client communication**
Does the course give you teaching and experience in all aspects of communicating with your clients: approaching them for work; liaising with them during the design and then the build process; invoicing; following up on late payments?
- 2. Contractor communication**
This includes putting a job out to tender, site visits, discussing problems, and further instructions during the build.
- 3. Contracts with: clients, contractors, third parties**
There are a number of ways to have a contract with your clients and a course should teach you about the various options so that you can choose how you wish to work.
- 4. Laws and legal responsibilities**
There are several laws that affect the garden designers work: laws relating to contracts with client and contractors, laws relating to the landscape and trees, laws relating to planning and laws relating to site safety and employment.
- 5. Prospective market and clientele: bespoke, design & build**
You will need to think about what sort of garden you would ideally like to design and what sort of designer you would like to be. Tutors who are practising designers and course links with the industry will enable you to get information to help with these decisions.
- 6. What is taught about marketing your skills and business?**
Does the course teach about marketing? Will you have advice about writing your curriculum vitae and developing your portfolio?
- 7. What is taught about setting up and running a design business?**
Most designers are self-employed. Does the course cover business plans, book keeping etc.

Skills Tuition and Teaching Methods

- 1. Do the students learn to use and design with Computer Aided Design packages?**
Most large design studios that offer employment to graduates require a working knowledge of CAD.
- 2. If CAD is taught, do the students also learn hand drafting skills?**
Many designers feel that although CAD is becoming increasingly important, there are aspects of hand drafting that it cannot yet replace.
- 3. How much horticultural teaching is offered and in what depth?**
This is essential if you are planning to garden as part of your business, but many designers would argue that a thorough knowledge of horticulture is invaluable to any designer.
Some colleges may also offer the RHS Horticulture qualifications in addition.
- 4. Does the course offer practical horticultural experience and how much?**
- 5. How much construction and hard landscaping teaching is offered and in what depth?**
- 6. Does the course offer practical construction experience and how much?**
Essential for a career in design and build and very useful for any designer.

Course Credentials

1. **Is it an arts based, construction led or horticulturally biased course?**
Which you choose will depend on your personal preferences.
2. **Is there a school design style?**
3. **Are there practising designers teaching design on the course?**
4. **If so, are they professionally trained/accredited?**
5. **Is the course externally accredited in any way?**
There are various accrediting bodies.
You will be able to judge how rigorous the accreditation process is by asking about the regularity and details of assessment.
6. **Do they have external examiners?**
7. **How many of the graduates find work either in established practices or on their own?**
8. **Is there an element of work experience in the course?**
9. **What sort of work experience placements are available?**
10. **What help is available to find work experience?**
11. **Does the course have good links with the design industry?**
12. **What are the opportunities for taking your studies further after graduation?**

Garden Design Courses

1. **Design certificates and diplomas from private design colleges**
2. **Nationally Recognised Qualifications:**

Further Education

C&G (City and Guilds)
OCN (Open College Network)
NVQ (National Vocational Qualification)
NA/ND (National Award/National Diploma)

Higher Education

HNC (Higher National Certificate)
HND (Higher National Diploma)
Foundation Degree
BA or BSc (honours degree)
Postgraduate Certificate
Postgraduate Diploma
MA or MSc (masters degree)

UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) is the UK organisation that oversees all higher education placements. Its website will tell you about all the available HE courses

Examples of Accrediting Bodies

University accreditation

The British Accreditation Council for Further and Higher Education (BAC)

The Open & Distance Learning Quality Council (ODLQC)

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