

The 'Artisan Gardener': An under-recognised career

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There are many worthwhile jobs in the horticultural industry, but there is one which I feel is unrecognised and under-rated because it lacks an acknowledged name. It is commonly understood that what is unnamed frequently goes unseen, or at least tends to be overlooked.

My mentor, when I started gardening professionally, was Martin Keay, who worked in the inner Eastern suburbs of Auckland. He always described himself as a 'gardener', although in truth what he did was so much more than that. His clients generally had traditional homes and gardens, were often people who had good plant knowledge themselves or who had an interest in garden design, and who wanted someone to help them make their garden special. People heard about Martin, or saw the results of his work, and wanted a 'Martin garden'.

Meeting Martin opened my eyes to a role in horticulture that I had never encountered before, and one which could be a great career option for an intelligent and creative person. I was familiar with the jobbing gardener who came regularly to weed, trim, and tidy, and who hopefully had good general knowledge of the plants they were maintaining. There were, of course, the horticultural teams employed by local body councils who maintained parks and reserves, and possibly glasshouses, and these people frequently developed great plant knowledge. And there were the fabled gardeners, head-, under-, and apprentice-, who worked on grand gardens for the wealthy. More academically, there were the trained garden designers who could produce beautiful plans for others to execute, but frequently had limited plant knowledge, particularly regarding what might be successful in a particular situation or climate. There were also 'landscape gardeners' who filled a number of these roles, generally drove utes or small trucks, who tended to be more concerned with what is known as 'hard landscaping' – constructing garden fences and retaining walls, or laying paths and lawns, etc. – but who tended to have rather limited plant knowledge or design skills.

The way that Martin worked combined elements of all these activities. He brought together practical plant knowledge, an eagerness to keep 'his hands in the soil', a great sense of design, an intimate knowledge of the growing possibilities in the geographic area he was working in and an ability to communicate with his clients in a way that enabled the development of a garden that expressed his client's needs, and was beautiful to look at, and be in. He was quite able to sketch a design for a garden or structure but preferred not to make detailed plans, rather he preferred to work directly with an outside contractor to achieve the desired result.

I have met many people over the years who work in a similar manner to Martin, and have enjoyed seeing wonderful gardens developed under their direction and skill. But I have also met many young gardeners hoping to start a career in horticulture who believe that, to be a success, they must set up a company which employs lots of people, or take their hands out of the soil and just draw and talk, before they can become, as they imagine it, properly "professional" and earn the respect that comes with it.

The role I'm describing is more akin to that of an artist – someone who may work alone or with a little help, who executes commissions, and who is always trying to develop their knowledge of plants, design, and the science that underlies their work. With or without a degree or diploma, they are professional people, although some may be more comfortable with the idea of being an artist.

Others who follow a similar path to Martin may feel less comfortable with calling themselves a gardener. They may resort to 'landscape gardener', or perhaps 'garden designer', but neither of these names really encapsulate the full range of activities they do. They will spend a lot of their time hands-on, physically working in and managing the gardens they are developing, but their role will also encompass consulting – which might mean talking to clients about what they might do themselves to create a garden, helping clients with particular problems they have with plants they're growing, or assisting their clients from time to time with ideas as they develop their gardens themselves.

As often as I get the chance, I ask younger people who have been through technical horticulture courses what was covered, and what future working possibilities were suggested by their tutors. I have never come across anyone who has had it suggested that they might aspire to the sort of career exemplified by Martin. I think that if an appropriate name might be found for that role, if it was more widely understood and talked about, then a very satisfying and useful career might be discovered by people who might otherwise be lost to horticulture because they fail to find a role that satisfies them.

I suggest that an appropriate name for the way that Martin, and those others who have worked over the years in this way, might be 'Artisan Gardener' – recognising the different skills brought to the role, and in the hope that it may become a recognised and sought after life. A life, rather than a job, because for those who take it up, working becomes a pleasure. It is, by default, a form of self-employment, as in order to achieve the

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best results there should be no boss overseeing the vision and decisions generated between the client and the artisan gardener – although this does not preclude the possibility of there being only one client if the garden is large enough. And, as a professional, a good artisan gardener is (or should be) well-compensated for their work.

Finally, the word ‘artisan’ itself. For many it may sound pretentious, be too redolent of middle-class privilege, but employing such a person is inescapably a middle-class privilege. But if anyone has a better idea for the name then I would be very pleased to hear it.

This article was written prior to Martin being nominated for his RNZIH award but fortuitously became both an acknowledgement of Martin’s skills as well as an exploration of an important role in horticulture.



The artisan gardener is capable of creating a garden in almost any style, depending on their client's needs and interests, but their understanding of the importance of both plant material and overall design tends to lead to a semi-formal result such as shown here.