

# *Wendy's*



# *looked at life* from Boath sides now

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Sitting in Wendy Matheson's garden studio it's not hard to feel inspired to get out in the garden. The bright, airy room is situated in the walled garden of Boath House Hotel, the establishment she and husband Don have owned and lovingly restored since 1992.

There are drawings of garden designs on easels, piles of gardening magazines, mood boards for a variety of garden styles dotted along the expanse of window ledges and a big, comfy chair in the corner, which, until recently had been the dog's.

Wendy sits at her desk, an enormous computer screen with a design in progress on show.

"I really got into gardening when we bought Boath," Wendy told *Highland Life*.

"We'd come from a townhouse in Aberdeen with almost no garden and arrived at a place with 22 acres where nothing at all had been done for years. It was all overgrown.

"My love of gardening came from my parents. They were war babies and grew for Britain – we always had our own veggies and fresh flowers in the house.

"But I didn't have the opportunity to take it up myself until Boath.

"When we came here the Victorian greenhouses were dilapidated and couldn't even be restored.

"There were old specimen trees and shrubs, some hundreds of years old, not all of which were able to be saved."

It was going to take a lot of time and money to get in shape, though, so has been a work in progress over the years.

With the help of Boath's groundsman Ian Netherwood and more recently gardener Amanda Morrison, Wendy began what she generously describes as a "learning curve".

"I was on a mission," she said.

The first job was to establish a kitchen garden for the hotel so that the chef could have fresh salads and herbs for diners.

We looked out to the walled garden where Ian was patiently fixing up picket fencing to keep out the rabbits; yards and yards of it.

Wendy's husband Don, who had just popped in to say hello, joked that he couldn't shoot them because the guests would object, Wendy joking back that although



he was once in the Special Forces, he was a rubbish shot anyway!

So, kitchen garden established, complete with polytunnel, it was time to tackle the rest of the grounds.

In its heyday, Boath estate had five gardeners, although it had been much bigger then. I'm sure that Wendy would have been delighted to be able to call on such a workforce to help her out, but it wasn't to be.

"We'd got the garden to the stage where we really had to make improvements, replanting trees and so on," Wendy continued.

"So I started to do a RHS horticultural course.

"But it didn't cover enough on design.

"I looked at the situation and realised that I was going to have to do something more involved, so took a year out in 2007–2008 to do a post graduate diploma in Residential Landscape Design at Oxford College of Garden Design."

This was no mean feat for the mother of three and established hotelier.

"It was tough," she admitted. "I was also leaving the business but I knew 18 months ahead so we had time to train staff and so on. In all honesty, without the support of my husband and family, I wouldn't have been able to.

"It took a lot of dedication to do it but I felt it would enable

## 'There's still so much to learn... It's a continual process'

me to do Boath House justice and it's opened up a new career."

It was tough all round – there was the travelling south for the week and coming home for weekends, a journey which involved almost all modes of modern transport – trains, planes and automobiles. And the course was extremely involved, packing a three-year course into one, but she made it.

"We had to start at the basics," Wendy explained. "Learning how to survey, drawing board skills, Latin plant names, CAD and, most importantly, design rules, how and when to break them.

"I did my thesis on garden history of the 19th and 20th century from the Victorian plant finders to the Bauhaus movement and beyond, which gave me a really good basis for design – what's gone before through to the future."

The course entailed four projects through the year, with the students learning how to deal with clients, creating a brief, producing budgets, working with contractors and project management; basically seeing each job through the whole way.



There was a lot of design construction, learning which materials to use; balancing what's wanted with what's possible and fitting it into the environment and its relevance to the architecture.

One particular project Wendy would like to bring to Boath House in the future is a living swimming pool. This consists of two pools, the water being filtered through plants and reeds before going into the swimming area.

"It's lined," she explained, "but looks more like a natural pond and would fit more into the grounds at Boath."

Wendy graduated a year ago and started almost immediately on a project for a local client.

"It was great," she said, "really good to get hands on. It included most of the aspects covered by the course in one job. There was a pergola to be designed and constructed, a driveway to redesign and lay and a water feature.

"Another of my project involves a lot of drainage due to its situation.

"That's interesting because it has to be attractive but at the same time effective."

When contacted by a potential client, Wendy first meets with them to try to establish their taste in style. She chats to them about how much they wish to interact with their garden, their budget, plus various other preferences such as sculpture, water features or encouraging wildlife.

She then produces a mood board, sometimes two, which gives her and the customer a feeling of the road they're going down.

"This gives me a starter for 10," she said. "It's a valuable way to find out if we're on the right track and a feel for their garden aspirations."

She'll then create a design, using CAD and a 3D system which gives the client a walk-through view of their new garden space.

When all the design aspects are finished, Wendy creates a series of detailed drawings and specification documents for use by all the tradesmen who will be required for the job.

As part of her design business, Wendy is working on building relationships with local tradesmen, contractors and artisans so that she can recommend them to customers.

Wendy may have graduated but she's certainly not resting on her laurels.

"There's still so much to learn," she went on. "It's a continual process.

"It's not just the fads and trends, but the practicalities of all the microclimates we have here. What will succeed in a coastal situation will be completely different to what will work inland or at height.

"There are so many challenges."

One area where Wendy sees a growing market for her design services is with those affected by the current trend of



"garden grabbing" and the loss of privacy to neighbouring properties.

She's currently working on a project on the Black Isle where she has designed the outside space for working, also redesigning part of the plot which is now overlooked by a new house.

"There's a growing privacy issue for people," she said.

But most of all, Wendy would like to see people appreciating their gardens all year.

"Winter can be just as stunning as summer," she continued.

"There are the berries and the structure of trees and shrubs, even if they are bereft of leaves. And when they're frosted, that adds a new dimension.

"That's where good design can come in. It's more challenging to get a connection in winter and to be able to keep the interest going.

"Part of my remit is to get people to invest in their gardens more – even a small front one. They buy the whole plot when they purchase a house. A client can be looking to spend around 4–10 per cent of the value of their property on their garden redesign and as a result a good garden can increase the value of the property by 10–20 per cent. It's a no brainer really."

● Wendy Matheson runs WM Garden Design from her base at Boath House near Auldearn. *Highland Life* is delighted to announce that from August she will be providing us with a bi-monthly gardening column to inspire you all to make the most of your garden

