



Amateur Gardening

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Joe Swift replaces Rachel de Thame presenting the new TV series of *Small Town Gardens* that starts on Friday. **Tim Rumball** popped up to Leeds to find out why he got the job

IF IT AIN'T BROKE, don't fix it. That old adage has been applied by the BBC to programmes like *Ground Force* and *The Flying Gardener* to good effect – the familiar formats have won a host of fans across the nation both for the programmes and their presenters.

So it was a surprise to hear earlier this year that the new series of *Small Town Gardens* was to be presented, not by Rachel de Thame who did the job with such confidence last year, but by her *Gardeners' World* co-star Joe Swift.

The official reason for the swap was that Rachel was too busy with other work commitments.

Why Joe?

But why Joe? He doesn't have the glamour of Rachel or Chris Beardshaw, the presentational skills of Alan Titchmarsh, or the charms of Charlie Dimmock.

He's really just an ordinary Joe – a garden designer by trade who knows his plants. He seems a bit clumsy, a bit awkward, and talks to camera like he talks to his mates or his mum.

There have been times when that hasn't come across well on screen – the *Gardeners' World Special* called *The Combat Zone* screened a few weeks ago was a case in point. Rachel didn't come out of that one well, either.

But in the new series of *Small Town Gardens* that boyish

appeal works. Where Rachel simply presented the programme, working separately from the designer and landscape gardeners on each project, Joe is in the thick of it.

"The format's similar to last year's show," Joe told me, "but Vanessa (the producer) is mucking about with it a bit. I'm getting more involved with the designers.

"It's much more actuality, fly-on-the-wall documentary style rather than lots of pieces to camera – I try to get a bit more under the skin of how designers work.

"I'm right in there. It's the way I like to work, and I think television is moving on to give that sort of 'reality TV' feel. In this series every now and then the designer asks me what I think – and that shouldn't really be part of it!

"But it's because I'm a designer myself. I'm really interested in how the gardens are developed."

Moroccan

I'd travelled to Leeds to meet up with Joe and the film crew at the garden of Sue and Clive Protheroe.

Sue and Clive's house is a big, solid detached place built in stone on four storeys including the basement. It has a long front garden, and a square back garden about 40x40ft. (36x36m) surrounded by a high wall.

Clive Protheroe with his wife Sue, who's an AG reader



Joe Swift works closely with designers Juliet McKelvey (above left) and Judith Wise (above right) on the garden. View from above shows the geometric design (below), with octagonal sunken seating area, standard photinias with box edging at four corners, and patio dining area to the right





Towns we'll visit in the TV series

Acton, London;
Leeds, Yorkshire;
Highbury, Somerset;
Chippenham, Wiltshire;
Helensburgh, Strathclyde;
Fowey, Cornwall;
East Sheen, London;
Brighton, Sussex.

Judith Wise and Juliet McKelvey (top) used herbaceous plants to add colour and structure to the garden beds. A newly planted rose (inset) just couldn't blooming wait! The tiled table (left) was discovered by Sue Protheroe in a local shop

It's the back garden that is the subject of the second of eight programmes in the new *Small Town Gardens* series.

Sue and Clive are mad keen on all things Moroccan – their house is stuffed with furniture and artifacts from the North African country, and Sue had tried to copy the Moorish style in their garden. She's an *Amateur Gardening* reader and loves her plants, but doesn't pretend to be a garden designer.

"It was too disparate," said Sue. "I tried for months to draw out what I wanted on paper, but I needed help!"

She wrote to the BBC, and was invited to take part in *Small Town Gardens* (participants have to pay a substantial part of the cost of their garden makeovers).

Help was provided in the form of

Chelsea medal winning garden designers Judith Wise & Juliet McKelvey – the two halves of the London-based McKelvey Wise Partnership

Starting point

"The Protheroes' great interest is Morocco, so that was our starting point for the garden," Judith Wise told me.

"When we arrived here the walls of the garage were bright blue! It was the right idea, but didn't quite work.

"This is such an obvious geometric shape – the solid stone house with sharp lines, and the high plain wall surrounding the garden. It's lovely, with terracotta coping, and gives a very Mediterranean feel."

Juliet explained: "We visited the garden last August, and submitted our design in the December – it all had to be costed and sourced. It was the tiles that took the time. To get a surface that was affordable but was Moroccan – and these are genuine imported Moroccan tiles – was not easy!"

The tiles were sourced from a shop in London called Habibi, and in the programme viewers get a glimpse of the exotic interior as Juliet, Judith and Joe explore the amazing range of hand made tiles and furnishings the shop offers, while looking for inspiration for the Protheroes' garden.

It's on this visit that Judith comes up with the idea of a sunken feature for the garden. This octagonal seating area, which incorporates



Cushions add the finishing touch to the sunken seating area



planting pockets and a water feature, becomes the centrepiece of the whole design.

The programme follows the idea through onto paper and its presentation to the Protheroes: "I'm gobsmacked – I think it's great," says Clive. "It's beautiful" says Sue.

Work starts with digging, laying drains, sorting out wiring, painting... and rain.

Glamorous work?

Joe chats to the workmen, Judith and Juliet about the jobs they're busy with... and they're all soaked, and it's still raining. If anyone thinks making a gardening series is glamorous work, this programme should change their minds!

Joe and the girls take a break to visit York Gate garden, where they're inspired by bold architectural planting of trachycarpus and euphorbias, clipped yew balls and pyramids, and shuttlecock ferns.

All three rave about a small area enclosed by a tall yew hedge that's filled with topiary shapes – tall spikes and balls... hmmm!

Joe admires a path lined with black grass (*ophyogon*) surmounted by red tulips. Thankfully, the girls don't!

But it's nice to see this exchange of ideas. It makes the programme far more accessible to viewers, as do the continuing shots of the rain-soaked Protheroes' garden.

The planting starts to come together with standard photinias, clipped box, a huge palm, *Trachelospermum jasminoides*, trained on wires along the walls, plus a bed of herbaceous plants to bring in colour featuring grasses, bamboo, ceanothus, dwarf palms, hardy geraniums, penstemons, heucheras, *fatsia japonica*, variegated hostas and sedums.

"Judith and Juliet are over there deciding where they want their plants," says Joe. "They drew up a planting plan, but I don't think they're sticking to it – designers' licence!"

The corners of the sunken, tiled seating area are planted with lavender and hardy geraniums.

Hard slog

And suddenly, it's all finished.

"The inspiration for this sunken seating area came from the octagonal shape of a single tile," says Joe.

"It's been quite a hard slog – it's taken four people the best part of a month to complete – this is a major structure to build in your garden.

"Planting softens its harsh, geometric shape, while the strong layout is enclosed by structural planting and herbaceous perennials bring colour, scent and texture to the garden."

You really get the feeling that Joe's in his element describing the design of the finished garden.

"The water feature is the first thing you see as you come in the gate – it adds a lovely cooling, calming presence.

"The dining terrace is a natural extension to the kitchen and conservatory. The tiles tie in with the rest of the garden and the planting is subtly different – they've relied on just green here.

"Box balls and cones add a lovely rhythm all the way around the terrace."

Quite surprised

I'd guess that, like me, you'll be quite surprised when you get to the end of the programme and discover you're left wanting to hear and see more.

The relationship that develops between Joe and designers Judith and Juliet carries the viewer through the conception and execution of the garden, making it easy to understand and a pleasure to watch.

If the rest of the programmes in the eight part series are as good as this, I take my hat off to the BBC and Joe Swift.

The loss of Rachel de Thame as presenter could have left the series seriously broke. As it is, they've fixed it good.

I think I've misjudged that Mr Swift – he's no ordinary Joe. 🍷

◆ The first of eight programmes in the new *Small Town Gardens* series starts on Friday, 6 September on BBC2 at 8pm. Sue and Clive Protheroe's Leeds garden is the subject of the second programme in the series, shown on Friday 13 September at the same time.



Designing and building a garden is hard work, especially when you have to keep stopping for the TV cameras