

LANDSCAPE LINES

Hugo Bugg reflects on gardening and design, and the changing seasons



It's a pleasure to be joining *Devon Life* as a monthly columnist. Over the coming year, I'll be sharing reflections from my work as a garden designer across Devon and Dorset – from projects in progress and landscapes I'm getting to know, to the seasonal rhythms of my own garden at home. Each month will be a snapshot of what I'm doing, what I'm noticing, and how the landscape is changing as the year unfolds.

This morning I'm in my home studio, high above the Teign Valley, looking out across trees towards the church at Ashton and west to the hills beyond. It has been raining steadily for most of the day, but just now the sun has broken through, pouring light into the room and catching on the branches outside, each one holding heavy raindrops.

As the days begin to lengthen, I find myself spending more time outdoors again, both in my own garden and visiting sites across Devon and Dorset that are either in planning or already being built. This is one of my favourite times of year to look at landscapes. Before foliage softens everything, structure is easier to read. Trees, hedges and the gentle shifts of the land are all more apparent. You see what is really there, and how best to celebrate it, or where small, thoughtful changes might improve privacy or shelter.

I can hear my son and his friends happily launching themselves down the zipline I fitted last year, which cuts past the studio window and drops 50m through the garden. It feels like the right moment to step away from the desk, head back towards the house, and make a cup of coffee.

Moments like this, half working and half watching, are often how my working day begins.

This month, two projects in particular have required regular visits. One is in South Devon, near Diptford, the other in Dorset near Broadwindsor. Both involve ponds and natural swimming pools, and both sites already contain rivers or leats. These winter visits are less about construction and more about attention. Watching where water gathers, where it slows and where it escapes tells you far more now than it ever will in summer. Seeing the land under pressure is invaluable, and these quiet observations will shape how we respond in the months ahead.

The Devon project is part garden and part wider landscape. From the house, the view stretches across fields towards the River Avon, and the ambition is for the garden to feel inseparable from that setting. Wetland areas will be established to allow water to slow and spread naturally through the land, alongside work to restore hedgerows,



Hugo's son uses the zipline he installed in the garden. Photo: Hugo Bugg

Between rain and light

introduce climate-resilient trees, and manage meadow and wet ground as part of a connected whole. It is a garden that does not end at the fence line, but threads directly into the landscape around and beyond it.

This time of year always carries a particular energy. There is a sense of momentum returning, even though growth is still restrained. We are busy planting bare-root trees and shrubs, working quickly before dormancy fully breaks, knowing that what is planted now will establish quietly and steadily long before summer arrives. There is optimism in this work, but it is a measured optimism, rooted in patience rather than haste.

Back in my own garden, the seasonal signs continue to build. A large witch hazel (*Hamamelis × intermedia*) is one of my favourite plants here, and at this time of year it still holds its elegant, spider-like flowers, standing out clearly against the winter backdrop. On still days, its scent fills the house when we bring a few stems indoors. These moments of colour and fragrance feel especially generous in late winter, and remind me how important it is to notice what a garden offers when little else is demanding attention.

Planting winter-scented shrubs close to the house is one of the simplest ways to lift a garden at this time of year. Witch hazel, Christmas box (*Sarcococca confusa*) and daphne all reward you as you arrive or leave, offering scent, structure and a sense of welcome when much else is still held back. Many of these plants cope well with shade, and some, like *Sarcococca*, provide year-round glossy foliage as well as winter fragrance. They can also work beautifully in pots, making them easy to introduce even in smaller spaces.

Gardens are never made in a single moment. They are shaped slowly, through observation, care and thoughtful intervention. These early months of the year may be subtle rather than showy, but they carry a quiet optimism and set the tone for everything that follows. In the months ahead, I'll return to gardens in progress across Devon and Dorset, and to my own garden at home, sharing further reflections as the seasons shift and the year begins to gather pace. ●

Hugo Bugg is a garden designer, co-founder of Harris Bugg Studio and Devon Gardens Trust trustee, working on private gardens and landscapes across the South West and beyond.