

LANDSCAPE LINES

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



Brighter days are here. Blossom is beginning to show and there are moments when it feels spring has arrived. And yet, across many of the gardens and landscapes I have been working in recently, winter is still front of mind.

January's extraordinary rainfall has not been forgotten quickly, and in Devon, Dorset and Cornwall it continues to shape what we are doing on site now.

Over the past few weeks I have spent a lot of time outside, often in wellies, dealing with the after-effects of an exceptionally wet winter. I'm sure many of you have experienced flooded gardens, waterlogged lawns, or impassable lanes on the way to work. In some places, the ground is still slowly recovering. In others, water continues to move visibly through the landscape, leaving clear clues about how land really behaves when it is under pressure.

On several projects across the South West this year, our work has been shaped less by drawings and more by watching how water moves. Where does it arrive from? Where does it slow? Where does it naturally want to go? These are not theoretical questions. The land answers them very clearly when it is saturated. The temptation can be to try to fight water, to push it away quickly or force it elsewhere, but experience has taught me that this rarely leads to resilient gardens. The most successful landscapes are those that accept water as part of their character and respond to it with calm, considered design.

One family garden in Devon has brought this into particularly sharp focus. Set within the grounds of a listed watermill, the site has a long and visible relationship with water. Leats, channels and subtle changes in level tell a story about how the land has been shaped to manage flow over centuries. Despite this historic infrastructure, the intensity of rainfall earlier this year led to flooding across parts of the garden. With that experience still very recent, we are now working closely with a team of landscape contractors, groundworkers and specialist craftspeople to plan improvements that will better protect both the house and garden. Drainage routes are being refined on site, levels checked and rechecked, and materials chosen not just for how they look on a sunny day, but for how they will perform after the next period of heavy rain.

Alongside this practical work, more permanent elements are beginning to take shape. On the mill site, natural stone steps and finely detailed metal railings are being crafted and installed by talented local makers. These are practical yet beautiful



The landscape can reveal how watercourses were managed in the past

Water watching

additions, designed to help the family move safely and confidently through the garden in all conditions. They also bring reassurance. I am increasingly drawn to the idea of making beautiful things that work hard. Elements that earn their place through use and longevity rather than spectacle.

The winter storms have also prompted quieter responses. Fallen timber has been gathered and reused to form habitat piles in the wilder areas of the garden, creating shelter for insects and other wildlife while giving rhythm and structure to those spaces.

After such a wet winter, planting choices feel especially important. Many of us are now thinking about plants that can tolerate periods of saturation yet still perform well when conditions turn drier later in the year. In our work, we are returning to reliable, long-lived plants that cope with change rather than resisting it. *Gillenia trifoliata* has proved quietly resilient in lighter shade and cooler soils, while *Persicarias* offer long flowering seasons and generosity in both sun and shade. Grasses play an equally important role. *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' brings structure and clarity through much of the year, while *Molinia* adds a softer, shifting quality and copes well with fluctuating moisture. Even plants like *Euphorbia*, often

thought of as dry-garden specialists, have surprised us with how well they handle wet winters when drainage is right. These are plants that work hard, but remain beautiful.

As April moves on, growth will accelerate and the visual language of gardens will begin to change almost week by week. The water will recede, but it leaves behind valuable information if we take the time to read it. Getting these early decisions right now will quietly shape how these gardens perform for many years to come.

I have recently joined the Devon Gardens Trust as a trustee. Many of the gardens it supports sit within complex landscapes shaped by rivers, valleys and changing weather patterns. There are several opportunities this April to visit gardens across the county, including Weir Cottage and Rumleigh (April 2) in the Tamar Valley, Plaz Metaxu (April 14), and Hartland Abbey (April 21). They offer a chance to see how different landscapes respond to their setting, and how thoughtful stewardship helps them endure. ●

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.