



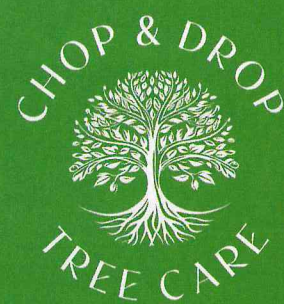
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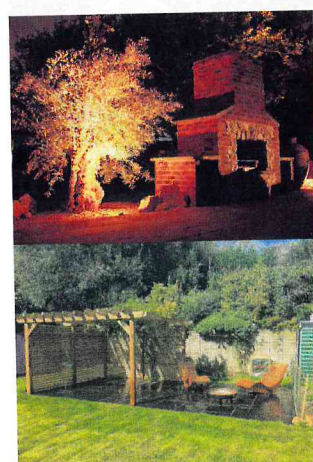
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LANDSCAPE LINES

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



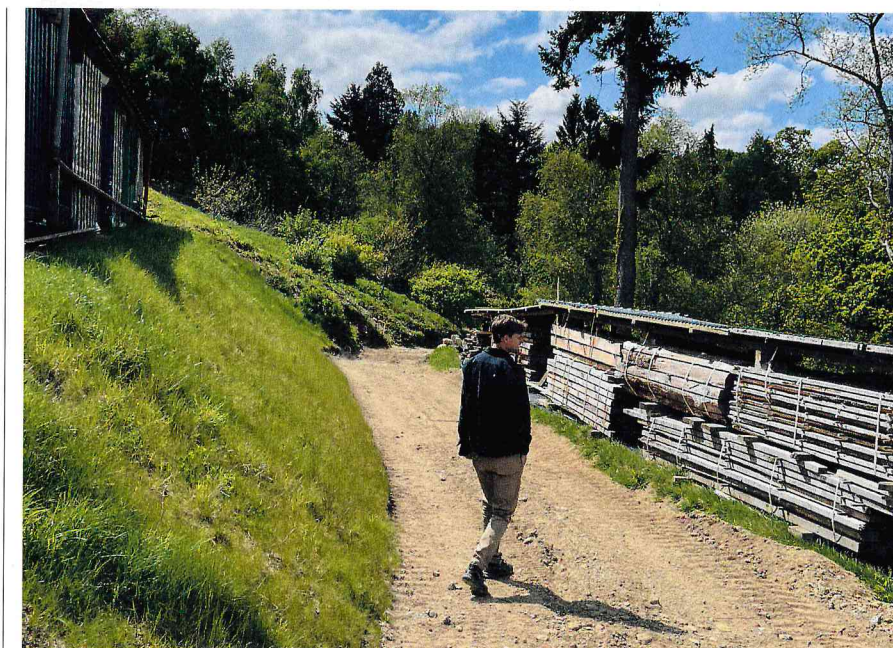
It has been a summer of contrasts. After months of sustained winter rainfall, the kind that left fields waterlogged and lanes impassable well into spring, the ground has dried with surprising speed. In my own garden, I planted around 3,000 perennials, shrubs, and grasses over the winter. It was an experiment of sorts: half went into sand, to trial drought-tolerant and low-nutrient planting; the other half into more conventional topsoil with a compost mulch. The results, just a few weeks into the dry spell, have been instructive. New planting in soil is showing signs of stress and needs regular watering to establish; the planting in sand is managing far better. When I dig down with my hands, the sand is retaining moisture at depth where the topsoil is not.

This pattern of wet winters followed by extended dry periods feels increasingly familiar. Each year still brings its own variation, and it would be an overstatement to suggest every summer is harder than the last. But there is a broader shift visible, and one of the most telling signs is timing. Drought pressure is arriving earlier, often in April, which is precisely when plants are breaking dormancy and pushing into rapid growth. That alignment of water stress with peak demand puts real pressure on new planting and established trees alike.

Among the projects where this is most directly shaping our thinking is one near Chagford, in the heart of Dartmoor. The site is a rolling hillside that banks the River Teign, with areas of woodland, open meadow, and more curated garden threaded through it. The views are close and immersive: the valley, the treeline, the river rippling below. In winter the Teign runs full and forceful; in summer its level drops to reveal broad granite boulders, beautiful in their own way, but a reminder of water scarcity that is easy to overlook when January's floods are still in mind.

The clients briefed us to design for climate resilience from the outset. That brief sharpened further in early 2025, when the California wildfires caused devastation on a scale that was difficult to watch from a distance. Closer to home, Dartmoor saw wildfires of its own in May of the same year, with more than 1,200 acres of moorland destroyed. For a project already connected to open moorland landscape, the question of wildfire risk stopped being abstract.

Designing a garden that reduces wildfire risk does not require sacrificing beauty. The key is understanding three zones around a property, each with its own logic. In the immediate zone (within roughly two metres of the building), the priority is to avoid



Hugo explores the Chagford garden project.

The long dry

flammable materials entirely: hard surfaces of stone or gravel, no combustible materials stored close to walls, and no trees or shrubs whose canopy overhangs the structure. In the intermediate zone, from two to 10 metres, the focus shifts to creating natural firebreaks through paths, walls, and areas of low planting that interrupt the continuity of fuel. Trees here should stand as individuals or small groups, with space kept between their canopies and lower branches kept clear. In the extended zone, from 10 to 30 metres, the aim is to prevent fire from climbing into canopies by maintaining openings between tree groups and continuing to manage the lower limbs.

One point worth emphasising: these strategies are designed to protect the building and the people within it, not the garden itself. This changes the conversation from sacrifice to pragmatism, and in practice the interventions involved (considered paths, open meadows between planted areas, generous spacing) are things we would pursue in many gardens regardless of fire risk.

Drought-tolerant planting has become one of the more absorbing questions of the

moment. In my own garden trial, several plants are proving themselves across both sand and soil: *Nepeta* 'Walker's Low', *Phlomis russeliana*, *Calamintha nepeta*, and *Amsonia tabernaemontana* are all holding well; *Baptisia* 'Twilite Prairieblues' has barely flinched. For shadier situations, *Gillenia trifoliata* and *Epimedium pubigerum* continue to reward. The broader lesson from both the trial and the Chagford project is that improving drainage in winter opens up a far wider palette of drought-tolerant planting, much of it drawing on Mediterranean species that handle summer heat with ease.

Chagford sits only a few miles upriver from my own garden; the same Teign runs past both sites. The work we are doing there to stabilise banks, manage planting carefully, and support the riverine landscape will, in a quiet way, benefit the water as it continues downstream. That continuity feels right, and it is what good design should do.

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.