

Lessons *in history*

Stephanie Mahon signed up for some study and discovered that it doesn't get much better than learning about garden design in the inspirational, history-soaked surroundings of Hampton Court Palace



Hampton Court has seen many royal pairings throughout the centuries, though perhaps never as happy a match as the renowned international KLC School of Design with the palace gardens. These regal acres are now part of a learning centre for the school's many courses on gardening, plants and design, with different gardens serving as a practical textbook of how things were done - and are still being done.

The lucky students who will call this place college can pick and choose from the crown jewels of some historic garden gems. Free lecture period? Why not visit the National Collection of *Heliotropus arborescens*? Coffee break? Pop over and see the Great Vine, more than 230 years old and still producing sweet black dessert grapes every year. It was planted by Capability Brown who, as royal gardener for 20 years, lived here beside another national favourite, the maze (although he was expressly ordered not to tamper with it).

Even the classroom looks out through ornate ovoid windows over the Great Fountain Garden, with its avenue of large clipped yews. These apartments also house an inner courtyard of rooms where, I was reliably assured by a fellow course attendee, the fire of March 1986 started. Looking up at the splendid architecture now, one could never tell those flames gutted this entire wing.

I went to the palace to check out how the new partnership were getting on, and took part in 'Experience Garden Design', a one-day

introduction to the basics - the first course KLC had ever held at there. After a cup of tea at the cafe, we headed over to the school's apartment to settle down for some design education. Most people had come to figure out what to do with their own gardens, although a few were interior designers looking to extend their businesses to outside the home.

We had fun in the morning with exercises matching planting schemes and learning the lingo of outdoor-space artists from our informative and helpful teacher, before being let loose on a client brief to fix up a suburban family backyard on paper, armed with paper cut-outs, pencils and imagination. This confirmed my suspicions that I am more of a plantswoman than design goddess, and had

me flapping about with circles and tracing paper in not a little frustration.

At lunchtime, I went to see the 20th-century gardens across the canal, walking along all 580 flower-filled metres of the Broad Walk (the longest herbaceous border in world) to get there. Over on this quieter side of the estate is the old apprentices' garden, once a horse paddock and used in the 1970s for palace gardeners-in-waiting to test, try and practice their skills - and now resurrected for the very same purpose: for KLC students to make into their very own training ground for practical classes.

The sunny plot is surrounded by hornbeam hedging and houses a fruit cage, herb beds and borders for pupils to play with, and outside of this sits a lawn, waiting expectantly to become a KLC showpiece garden. Designs have been drawn up, ideas vetted, and future students at Hampton Court will have the power to create a little planted paradis for visitors to the palace to enjoy.

Back in the classroom, with a little help from the others, I managed to complete my drawings for the pretend family, though the pile of eraser shavings on the table told its own story of trying to wring blood from a turnip. I may have known more plants than anyone else (ah, how we petty sorts console ourselves), but I might need more than a one-day course at this design malarkey. And I definitely didn't get to see all 60 acres of the palace gardens. Where's that course prospectus again?

SCHOOL OF DESIGN

KLC School of Design hold both short courses and career-based training at Hampton Court Palace, including a one-day workshop 'Growing your own vegetables' on 6 February, and a part-time, three-term diploma in garden design, two days a week, beginning on 12 January. To find out more about these and other courses, call +44 (0)20 7376 3377 or go to www.klc.co.uk. Hampton Court Gardens are open every day; winter 10am-4.30pm, summer 10am-6pm. www.hrp.org.uk

