



Celine David

31, Maida Vale

Celine David, French-born and Gabon-raised, went into banking straight from university; it may have been the adventurousness her choice of career would fail to satisfy that impelled her to choose a job in London rather than Paris. After seven years – four as a financial analyst at UBS, the rest at Crédit Suisse as a telecoms stockbroker – she was made redundant in 2008.

'I grew up in Gabon, West Africa, which is a very luxurious nation – the flowers catch your attention,' David explains in prettily accented English. 'I went to boarding school in Paris but

in the summer holidays, when my parents were in St Jean de Luz, I helped with the gardening which I always found really gratifying.' Her family saw success in very traditional terms and it never occurred to her to rebel. 'I come from a family that emphasises academic achievement and I was good, so I was supposed to go to a *grande école* [a prestigious Parisian super-university] and I did that. But I didn't enjoy it much.'

Still, she stuck with it, and would have carried on for a little while at least – her boyfriend, a lawyer, 'is very supportive, but he would have

liked me to do a couple years more in finance.'

He was, however, indirectly responsible for David's new career. They got a flat together in Maida Vale, with a communal garden. 'It wasn't a garden, though, it was a disaster,' she says. 'That was when the real *déjà* came. I changed it, with the advice of my neighbour, who loved plants and knew a lot. I learnt about the importance of size – you have to think about contrast and how it will look once the plants reach full height. I got obsessed: I once replanted 70 shrubs in a day...'

So, once she was redundant, David found the KLC School of Design online and signed up for a course. 'You have to learn to create technical drawings,' she says excitedly, 'like an architect. Everything has to be masterplanned to scale.' They also study the history of garden design and learn about choosing plants and balancing borders. 'You don't want a big void in winter, or too many evergreens together. You need plants that contrast in colour, form and aspect. My preference is quite contemporary – I like architectural plants.' But of course, if she's working with a client it's about their preference. The same goes for budget: 'You can spend £700 on an olive tree

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or £700 to do a whole garden. It depends how patient you are; it's much cheaper to get seeds or bulbs than full-grown plants.'

David says that if she'd known what she wanted to do at 18 she would have done it then, but although she hated her job – 'I was so bored in finance. It was intellectually challenging, but I just didn't like it. And it was hard: I'd be there at 6.30am until 5pm, sat with the traders. If the share price dropped and you'd told them to buy, they wouldn't be very happy with you' – it has served her well, giving her confidence ('I was doing all right in an environment that was really tough'), as well as helpful skills – there probably aren't many starter garden designers quite as confident in their ability to calculate a profit margin. 'I could do finance,' she says, 'but this I really like, so I'm going to make it work. My previous job was so stressful – that's unsustainable, whereas this I can picture doing in ten years' time.' Not that starting a business is exactly stress free: 'Instead of worrying about trading positions I'm worrying about my website, my business card and so on.' And then there's the drop in income. But she's not too worried about that. 'For some reason, I was always economical so not much has changed there, but I am certainly much more careful about how often I go to restaurants.' But that is her boyfriend's good luck, 'because I love eating and so I have had no choice but to improve my cooking!' A prime chef and a garden supremo – he's very lucky. But then evidently David feels that she is, too. 'I have a white van now,' she says proudly, 'and I love it. My job is amazing and beautiful. I'm doing exactly what I want to do.' *Nina Caplan*
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