

# “I NEEDED SOMETHING THAT FEEDS THE SOUL, NOT JUST THE BANK BALANCE”

**Penelope Walker's** genuine passion for charity Panathlon made her first Chelsea garden a joyful experience

WORDS:  
NINA MASON

**P**enelope Walker is without a doubt a 'glass half full' person. Her sunny disposition instantly puts you at ease, and that's despite us talking straight off the back of Walker relocating her All About Plants garden immediately after the RHS Chelsea Flower Show closed its doors this year.

Fortunately, she's off to Dorset that weekend, with plans to visit The Newt in Somerset – so it's not a complete break from horticulture. “If I were to retire tomorrow, I would still go to gardens and see plants.”

It's quite a turnaround for someone who admits that she didn't come into garden design for a love of them. “I'm no Frances Tophill. My story doesn't start with me as a three-year-old with an immaculate vegetable trug or winning awards at nine for my courgettes. I do love plants, but that's not what led me into it.” ▶





Walker's first career was "really black and white", working in finance in the city "with zero creativity". "Where I grew up [in South London], lots of people just worked in the city, it was a natural place to be. I went in because I wanted to make money, but then realised that I didn't want to sell out in that way. I needed something that feeds the soul, not just the bank balance."

And "there's nothing that focuses your attention like a loss," says Walker, whose father passed away when she was 29. It shifted her focus. She'd recently acquired her own garden and around the same time too and, by chance, met a garden designer and visited RHS Chelsea for the first time.

"It was a real lightbulb moment when I had my eyes opened to the whole industry. I was quite ignorant about it before and wasn't really aware that it was a thing. So, I started looking into it and working out what skills I'd need and how that would fit, and I felt I had the skillset to become a designer. I've always had an interest in being creative and in architecture, I love being outdoors, and I love good design."

Walker is what she calls a "design-led garden designer". She retrained on a short course to "dip my toe in", which only further fuelled her newfound passion, finding interest in the construction side too, "that kind of minutia detail" needed to get a job completed well. It sparked a realisation that she needed to learn more about plants, though, so she went to work for The Place for Plants in Suffolk "They were very, very knowledgeable. One of the owners [Rupert Eley] is actually a judge in the floral displays at Chelsea. I think his great, great grandfather was a plant

**"It was probably a bit of a bonkers idea to go into an industry that you don't have lots of knowledge in and then try to be self-employed"**



©Jayne Lloyd Photography

hunter. He was certainly a founder of The Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group. I was lucky enough to train alongside a lady who had been trained by Beth Chatto too and another chap whose parents had grown clematis. I felt so fortunate and like all the stars were aligning."

After a year, Walker started to pick up clients through the nursery, being "really honest with them" about her level of experience in garden design. "It was probably a bit of a bonkers idea to go into an industry that you don't have lots of knowledge in and then try to be self-employed. So, I've learned every single lesson the hard way – but I've learned the lessons." She's now eight years into running her own practice,

Llevelo Garden Design. Despite a marketing consultant warning against using the name Llevelo – which Walker says has no official meaning – she wanted to build a brand and have a name that was completely unique. It's where her background, including a degree in Business, comes in handy. She also wanted to focus on offering "excellent customer service" off the back of "working with really demanding customers with really high expectations in finance".



The practice boasts a wide range of projects from Walker's base in Suffolk, having moved out of the city, and later Essex, years ago. "I'm slowly moving north," she laughs. But it sounds as though she's unlikely to move any time soon from Suffolk, where there's "really nice beaches and lovely open spaces, loads of colour and real chocolate box villages – I love it."



**"If you're following your heart and doing what you're meant to be doing, then it will work itself out in the end"**

It's the ideal location for taking on a variety of work too, not just locally but in her former home counties. "In Essex, the projects are slightly smaller as we're getting closer to London, and the demand is for more geometric and more modern gardens, especially the further south you go. In Suffolk, you're more likely to get a larger garden; it can be several acres and you're not going to manipulate and design every inch of it – some of it has to be natural. Then obviously in London, you move into really small gardens and rooftop terraces, and I love designing small gardens because that's where the real challenge is. There's no room for error;

every inch counts. So, that diversity brings so much joy to my work." As you may have already guessed, there are no regrets in switching from the high pressure of working in the city. "I was speaking to a lot of people at Chelsea who were thinking

about going into garden design. Yes, it's financially difficult to transition and you have to retrain. But if you're following your heart and doing what you're meant to be doing, then it will work itself out in the end."

It certainly seems to have for Walker, who won her first Silver Gilt medal at the show for The Panathlon Joy Garden which was constructed by Stewart Landscape Construction. She'd met Ashley Icton, CEO of

the charity – which hosts sports competitions for those with SEND – at a local networking event. After becoming aware of Project Giving Back, which helps charities to exhibit gardens at Chelsea, she pitched the idea of a show garden to Icton.

"Panathlon has been going for about 25 years, but it's not a well known charity. The reality is that, because it's such an unknown charity, unless you have a child with a special educational needs and disabilities then you've probably never heard of them – though demand for their services goes up each year. Last year, over 62,000 children attended a Panathlon event. So, as with all charities and businesses, it's making sure that the funds are there to meet demand, and Chelsea was a part of their growth plan to gain a broader awareness of their brand."

Walker was determined that the garden have a positive message about the children helped by Panathlon. "For some of the children attending a Panathlon event it's the first time they're allowed to compete, which can really change that child's self-belief and is amazing to witness."

"Independent research in October 2023 reported that due to Panathlon, 92% of schools reported increased self-belief and pride in Panathlon participants, which has long-term ramifications, says Walker. "Our system is very good at looking after people with special educational needs and disabilities up until the ▶



- 1 The Panathlon Joy Garden ©Jayne Lloyd Photography
- 2 Joyful concave path of Vande Moortel pavers ©Jayne Lloyd Photography
- 3 Essex Garden Design completed by Llevelo
- 4 Sunken seating area with fire table designed by Llevelo



age of 18 and then there's a lot less support. But if you believe you can get a job and you're an active person in society then that's better for everyone. So, I'm completely invested in what Panathlon does. I felt glad to have found them. To believe in everything that you're doing at Chelsea definitely helps on those challenging days."

Walker wanted her first show garden to promote a message of inclusivity and joy, but "joy is intangible and completely subjective". So, she researched what people associate with being joyful. Curves and colour came up repeatedly, both of which were therefore incorporated throughout the design, from the winding path of Vande Moortel bricks to the vibrant rear boundary, which features timber sculptures weaving across it, or "ribbons" as an "acknowledgement of celebration – celebration being a part of joy, but also celebrating the children's sporting success."

The garden has now been relocated to Marjorie McClure School in South London, which has "really strong links with the charity" and is "delighted" with the new addition. "You know what it's like, schools never have any budget; so, to get a garden that has been to Chelsea that has these amazing trees and all this colourful planting is amazing. They're over the moon, which is really nice to have seen that response."

Prior to this year, Walker's Chelsea experience had been designing stands. Whilst



**"I'm completely invested in what Panathlon does. I felt glad to have found them. To believe in everything that you're doing at Chelsea definitely helps on those challenging days"**

she says it wasn't a "huge shift" to design a garden, there "was a shift mentally – there's a lot more pressure."

She's still caught the 'Chelsea bug', though, with ambitions to design a garden for the RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival where "there is less pressure on space" as it is outside central London.

Outside of shows, Walker is eager to explore the possibility of commercial work. "It's quite a different animal to residential. I love working with residential clients, but I'd love to get more

involved with hotels and luxury spas, the more high-end boutique section of the market, where it's very much about client experience.

They try to create a certain ambience and I strongly believe that part of that narrative is within the landscape as well."

Having already created joy through her first Chelsea garden, Walker will certainly be able to create any atmosphere a commercial client desires – and all with a smile.



5 Adil Ghani and Paul Hollywood at the Panathlon Joy Garden ©Andrew Fosker

6 Penelope ©Jayne Lloyd Photography

7 Plant detail at the Panathlon Joy Garden ©Jayne Lloyd Photography

