



# Down the Garden Path

Martians Reunited  
talks to

## Jane Stevens (now Nichols)

It's a long way from visiting car parts manufacturers in order to explore injection moulding techniques for Flavia to running a garden photography business, or apparently so.

But there's quite a bit in common between the two. Both need a discriminating eye, a strong feeling for quality and the ability to see possibilities beyond the present.

Jane Stevens (now Jane Nichols) started her Mars life as a third-year Food Science student at Reading with a holiday job in Four Square, "taking swabs from various places around the factory in order to see what would grow", as she puts it.

Now, 20-odd years later, she finds herself a big shot in the photography world – running the photography library of Clive Nichols, one of the world's foremost botanical photographers (and, coincidentally, her husband) and directing the International Garden Photographer of the Year competition.



Wisteria Walk, Hermannshof, Germany by Jerry Harpur.  
Taken from International Garden Photographer of the Year, Collection 01. [www.igpoty.com](http://www.igpoty.com)

## So what was the route from one to the other?

"I've always been practical but also reasonably analytical, so Food Science seemed a good degree choice. Then after finishing at Reading I wasn't sure what I wanted to do so went back to Four Square as an R&D technician.

"I bumbled along doing that for a bit and gradually realised that there were all these other people, also new graduates, having the time of their lives on the graduate trainee programme. So I said, What about me? Why can't I be on this programme too? "

It was the range of management courses that went down particularly well. "Some of those courses - for example, 'Seeds of Greatness' really changed my life. They make you realise that you really are a valuable person, that you do have something to give.

"What Mars doesn't always realise is that the training has an impact on partners too: it's changed Clive too, and we run the business in a much more professional way because of the Mars training."

Before that move, however, Jane stayed another nine years at Four Square, moving from R&D to Packaging Buying (which was where those visits to car parts factories came in, sourcing nozzles for Flavia) and from Packaging Buying to Sales Development. Then came children and a career re-think.

"I went back to work part-time after my daughter was born, but it was very difficult to do a proper job part-time - at least the job I was doing. With the best will in the world people decide things when you're not there, so it's easy to feel on the outside".



Rose Gertrude Jekyll. Hadspen Garden, Somerset  
Clive Nichols, New Shoots

So Jane decided to change direction completely and take over the management of her husband Clive's photography business.

Clive - they met at university where he was a part-time pizza chef and she a waitress - started as a travel photographer but has made his name with flowers and gardens - with a string of awards and books, and a photo library of 100,000+ images.

## The photography business

The whole business model for photographers has changed since the arrival of digital, Jane explains. Now that everyone has digital cameras full of features and can take reasonable pictures with them, professional photographers have to be much more versatile and add value in different ways.

"Before, selling photographs was a matter of who you knew: knocking on doors, showing your portfolio. Now it's much more a question of doing commissioned work and also gaining editorial coverage both for us and our clients."

### So, how did the business change when she joined?

"We started by setting up a database and put the first 7,000 images on the computer, with the help of a guy I knew on shift at Four Square. We still refer back fondly to the days of Roger's database!

We've scanned and added a further 100,000 transparencies over the last five years as well as all the digital photographs that are increasingly becoming the norm in the way we work."



Close up of Canna Speciosa 'Striata'. Clive Nichols, New Shoots

### What now?

"I only ever wanted this to be a lifestyle business; we've got no ambitions to be another Getty Images. But Clive and I run this business because we share the urge to inspire people to appreciate the beauty of flowers and gardens."

They also, of course, want to run the business as effectively as possible. It may be what Jane describes as a lifestyle business - and, in their home and office built of golden Cotswold stone it looks a very agreeable one, but there are clear signs of Mars influence at work. Jane works with a coach - her old line manager from Four Square, Glyn Heald, and the business has planning and management processes that owe a lot to Mars - fewer 0000s on the plans, perhaps, but the same rigour and the same drive for quality.

Jane has now set up a new company to run photography competitions and exhibitions. The first project is the International Garden Photographer of the Year competition, which exhibits at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew. This was its first year and attracted 22000 entries; Jane hopes to develop this project further and also to apply the concept to other subjects and venues.

A far cry from Flavia? Perhaps - but also the ideal setting in which to savour it.



Sunrise at Cloudehill 1, by Claire Takacs. Taken from International Garden Photographer of the Year, Collection 01. [www.igpoty.com](http://www.igpoty.com)