

# Roots, Shoots and Wellington Boots...

**The story of how one Mars P&O manager became a garden designer – otherwise known as the Journey from Mars to Earth, by Vanessa Faulkner**



Strange as it seems looking back, when I was 16, my father persuaded me to seriously consider engineering as a career. There are many things that interest a girl of 16, but I can assure you that generally speaking, engineering is not one of them! However back in 1975 there was a bit of a drive to persuade the fairer sex into the profession (sadly I don't think it's much different now) and I was one of those targeted.

Anyway a few excursions from my school (a girls 6<sup>th</sup> form college) to local industry persuaded me that if nothing else I would be entering a career with an interesting male/female ratio! Such was my naivety of signing up for this exotic career that I didn't spot that there were some potentially quite glamorous branches of engineering, but ended up in the grass roots UK manufacturing industry at W.H. Allen – builders of pumps, diesel engines and steam turbines. And so the roots of my career started to develop.

I wasn't a truly 'techie' engineer and after qualifying, moved on in search of fame, fortune and exotic travel to a Consultancy which sounded much more glamorous – my first project was to visit a landfill gas generation project on a rubbish tip – not exactly the height of glamour - and the second an aluminium smelter expansion in Bahrain – a bit better. Still it was all very character building stuff, which makes for very sturdy and strong roots. But I still nurtured dreams of a management career and the opportunity for sharp business suits and a filofax. It was during this time that I bought a book called the Garden Makers Manual by David Stevens and got to work on making my first garden.

About this time a very good friend of mine joined Mars and regaled us with stories of the excellent management training programme (and the exorbitant salaries!) and so I was persuaded to apply. I joined Mars Confectionery, Slough in 1988, as a 'first bounce' management trainee in the commercial division. Although this sounds like a need for a course of therapy now, it quickly proved to be the 'shoots' of a budding management career. After an inauspicious start in Engineering Buying at the Liverpool Road factory I moved the boot to the other foot and into P&O to take responsibility for graduate recruitment and the management training scheme. The rest of my time at Mars was spent with the P&O division as both a Personnel Manager and finally as Pay and Benefits Manager for the Slough site.

Whilst Mars continued to enrich me with diverse management experiences my interest in my garden grew as a therapeutic outdoor hobby to balance the challenges of work. I transformed our garden and continued to expand my knowledge of plants and design at a horticultural evening class.

I can't remember the exact moment when the seed was planted in my mind that this hobby could become a career, but I took a career break after having our third child

in 1998 which provided the opportunity and space to stand back and consider options. Once 'Garden Designer' appeared on a mind map though, it became difficult to ignore and was quickly followed by some market research and a business plan! I started out just gardening for friends and family to gain experience, and then started to find other clients by local advertising. I also looked for opportunities to develop quickly and joined a team of gardeners working on larger country properties and started doing planting plans for a local designer, whilst studying Garden Design part-time at college. I went into partnership in 2005 with one of my fellow graduates, and we founded 'Coleby & Faulkner - Garden Design and Planting'. We have since been on an exciting journey and tremendous learning curve to discover what a complex and diverse subject it is, becoming experts not only in plants but in materials, building specifications, and computer aided design.

We both come from corporate business backgrounds and have found these to be a helpful basis for financial planning and accounting; marketing; presenting and selling; customer service; tender preparation and contract negotiation; managing suppliers; recruitment and all the other broad business areas that you need to be competent in, to run your own business. I also found that my background in engineering suddenly seemed to take on a new significance as I was already familiar with technical drawings, mathematical design principles and project management.

So we are now poised for our big break – maybe by doing a garden at Chelsea (I have a little dream about doing a chocolate themed garden!), or through a TV garden makeover show. But in the meantime I am one of those people fortunate enough to be pursuing my hobby as a career, a career I am passionate about. To be working with nature's raw materials, creating something beautiful and long lasting which will bring people pleasure is both a joy and an honour. I love it!



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