

# FERNANDO CARUNCHO

For the world-renowned garden designer Fernando Caruncho, creating a successful garden is all about its *genius loci* and controlling the light

WORDS STEPHANIE MAHON PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

**F**ernando Caruncho believes you know an authentic garden not when you see it, but when you feel it. "When you enter a real garden, time stops," he says. "You know immediately that you are in a special place. You are transformed." And he would know. The Spanish landscape designer is lauded for his gardens, which are often called minimalist and contemporary; harmonious and timeless.

Earlier this year, he was in London to receive a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society of Garden Designers, at a ceremony where the audience gave him a standing ovation. Despite this reverence, he insists, as did his hero 'Capability' Brown, that he is simply a gardener.

A city boy from Madrid, his passion for nature was kindled on summer visits to his grandfather's house near Malaga. "That is my first memory of being in a garden, with the scent of jasmine, orange trees and myrtle. It had a real impact on me," he says. His love of nature developed alongside his love of books, so it was no surprise when he decided to read philosophy at university. But after years of study, he abandoned his course to pursue landscape design.

"I learned that in the academies of the Ancient Greek philosophers, people took classes outside and spent time speaking and walking in the garden," he says. "I began to understand that great people have a special relationship with nature, and it came to me that to understand the world, thought isn't enough – you need action. To know, you need to be a gardener. This transformed my whole life."

Fernando is certainly a deep thinker – a conversation with him runs the gamut of references from Aristotle to Russell Page – but this is no cold intellectual. With face-creasing smiles and quiet raptures of delight, he is warm and kindly, eager to engage.

His gentle charm belies the character of his garden designs. These are places of order, intentional in every detail. His compositions feature clipped planting and mirror-like pools, often with grids of squares, circular motifs and strong vertical accents. But these elements, arranged with careful geometry, are present only to create a vessel to collect, reflect, refract and absorb Fernando's most important material, his artist's medium: the light. "To create gardens is to control the light," he explains.

He has developed this ethos over four decades and almost 200 projects. He created his first garden aged just 21, when his uncle, the interior designer Paco Muñoz, entrusted him with the landscaping for his new house near Madrid, designed by architect Richard Neutra. The garden took two years and was inspired by the 17th-century gardens of Kyoto, with rocks and gravel, acers

and clipped box. When a journalist from the French edition of *Vogue* visited to see the house, she was so impressed by the garden she ran a feature article on it that launched Fernando's career.

This early success was followed by Mas Floris near Girona, a garden of ten acres with all the hallmarks of Fernando's style – a pared-back palette of Mediterranean plants, a symmetrical layout and a reflecting pool to bring the sky down into the garden. The world of design really started to pay attention with the landscape at Mas de les Voltes, in Catalonia, where parterres of wheat were framed by olive trees and sentinels of cypress; and he confirmed his place in the pantheon of designers with Amastuola in Puglia, Italy, where he laid miles of espaliered grapevines in a pattern of undulating arcs, like waves in a sea of green.

He has gone on to work in France, the USA, New Zealand and the UK, but every project involves the same careful, considered process. To begin with, he visits the site several times to discover the spirit of the place, the *genius loci*. "When you approach a place for the first time, it is like meeting a person," he says. "You have to spend some time with them, get to know them."

Fernando also walks a lot in the surroundings outside the garden, as for him the key to a successful design is the synergy of the architecture of the house with the garden, and the garden with the wider landscape. He waits for the concept for the garden to reveal itself, like an impish muse: "The idea likes to play hide and seek with you." Back at his studio, sketches are drawn, and detailed scale models constructed. These maquettes are

topographically accurate miniscapes that are big enough for his associates to clamber around on as they experiment with the placement of elements.

Having turned 60 last year, Fernando feels it is now imperative to pass on what he knows to younger designers, especially his two latest recruits: his sons, Fernando and Pedro. "In these difficult times, we must ensure we transmit what we know to the next generation. It's the history of gardening – people passing on the torch in a very big chain of knowledge over the centuries. This is so important, because knowledge is the key to discovering beauty," he says, "and that should be the goal of all our lives." □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

Caruncho Garden & Architecture, Paseo de Narcea 17, Urbanización Ciudadcampo, San Sebastian de los Reyes, 28707 Madrid, Spain. Tel +34 91 172 33 03, web.fernandocaruncho.com

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