

# Joe Swift

Joe Swift so completely embodies the idea of 'an ordinary bloke' that it requires a conscious effort to remember he is anything but. With his north London accent and low-key dress sense, he would blend in completely on the number 253 bus to Hackney.

But on the long-running BBC2 show *Gardeners' World*, he has been inspiring audiences for the last 12 years.

Joe also writes a column for *The Times*, co-founded a garden design business and has published a number of books. His success makes him just the sort of creative, establishment figure that was always likely to emerge from his bohemian Hampstead upbringing – as he cheerfully admits. "It's ironic,

“I am lucky that I can reach people because I'm on telly and write for the papers, so I feel I should do anything I can to help”

really. I tried to escape my background and ended up being more like my parents than I ever realised.”

His father is actor Clive Swift, best known for his role as the put-upon husband of Hyacinth Bucket in sitcom *Keeping up Appearances*, and his mother is celebrated novelist Margaret Drabble. His aunt is the novelist AS Byatt, and biographer Sir Michael Holroyd is his stepfather. "You couldn't really rebel against a family like mine," he says.

His older brother and sister were academic. "But I was more into the arts. I played in a band, dropped out of art college, sailed around Australia, worked on a kibbutz." After a year travelling, he came home with some Indonesian jackets. "My mum and sister loved them and, before I knew what was happening, I was running a clothing business." For a while, his designs were sold everywhere from Harrods to Camden Lock Market (where he met wife-to-be Cathy James), until "one day I woke up and thought, 'What on earth am I doing in the rag trade?'"

How an ordinary bloke from an extraordinary family became one of Britain's most recognised gardeners – and president of one of its best-known garden charities

WORDS JODIE JONES PHOTOGRAPH CHARLIE HOPKINSON

"Then a friend's mum asked me to design her garden. I thought it would be a doddle because I'd done loads of jobbing landscape contracting, but I didn't know where to start." So he sold his clothing business and enrolled at The English Gardening School. "It was just me and 35 middle-aged posh women, but I learned a lot."

After graduation he set up an Islington shop called The Plant Room,

"to showcase my design work, as much as anything else". Then Anna Pavord wandered through the door. "She wrote a really nice piece about me in *The Independent* and the next thing I knew, the editor phoned and offered me a column on urban gardening."

When an advertisement appeared in *GARDENS ILLUSTRATED* asking 'Do you have modern ideas about gardening for television?', Joe didn't hesitate. "I used to watch all the programmes – *Ground Force*, *Home Front*, *Gardeners' World*. I just thought I'd have a go for a laugh.

"For my screen test, I took a black bamboo and a galvanised planter – how 90s is that? But the bamboo was pot-bound and I couldn't get it out. It took me ten minutes of increasing hysteria."

He proved a small-screen natural, with a winning mixture of design cred and no-nonsense pragmatism. He loves "a bit of high-end garden design", but got an equal buzz out of harvesting his first crops from his allotment. He clearly understands and values what

makes a great garden, but feels no need to float off into hyperbole. "New plant varieties aren't all that exciting to me. I'm quite a broad brush-stroke gardener. Creatively, I'm just filling in spaces." Sacrilege, shout some. Sanity, respond others. Whatever your viewpoint, make no mistake that Joe has utter faith in the power of gardens. "I know how important a bit of urban green is – it's good for the soul."

He is patron of a raft of charities, and president of the National Gardens Scheme, under which 3,700 gardens will open to visitors in aid of charity this year. "I'm lucky that I can reach people because I'm on telly and write for the papers, so I feel I should do anything I can to help." In 2010 he handed over £2.5 million in cheques from the NGS to Marie Curie, Macmillan and the other charities the NGS supports. "How fantastic is that?"

So where next for the gardening geezer? "I don't have massive goals. I want to do a Chelsea garden, but I'm always saying that and I never quite get around to it. The next five years with my children [Connie, 11, and Stanley, 14] will be really important so I don't want to start haring off all over the place again like I used to.

"Mainly, I'd like time to go and watch football at the Arsenal or play golf. I'm quite shallow, really." □

• *The Yellow Book 2011* lists all gardens open in England and Wales under the NGS this year and costs £9.99. Gardens also listed at [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)  
NEXT MONTH Madame Currel of Saint-Jean de Beauregard near Paris, home to one of Europe's best flower shows.

**BBC** Joe Swift is a presenter of *Gardeners' World*, Fridays from 11 March, 8.30pm, BBC2.

