

# real gardens

## 'THESE DAYS, I'M MORE ALAN TITCHMARSH THAN GORDON RAMSAY'

Former restaurant owner Sally Mays, 39, is co-founder of Northamptonshire-based Artemis Landscape Architecture.

### HOW LONG WERE YOU IN THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS?

Almost a decade. My husband, Michael, and I bought our restaurant in 1992 – I didn't have any particular ambition to get into that industry, but I wanted to build a business from scratch. When a chapel came up for sale in Stoke Bruerne, Northamptonshire, we decided to refurbish it and open a restaurant, called The Old Chapel.

### WHAT WAS IT LIKE?

It was a fairly casual bistro, but we developed a great reputation for fresh, home-cooked dishes made using local produce. It was manic and we worked seven days a week, from 8am to 1am. I would do everything, from prepping food and going to the cash-and-carry, to setting up front of house and coming up with menu ideas.

### WHAT MADE YOU CHANGE DIRECTION?

I wanted a new challenge. I was exhausted and I also felt I'd gone as far as I could. We'd built the place up from scratch to a successful concern, employing 15 staff. The part I'd enjoyed most was starting the business, planning the look and feel of the restaurant. The day-to-day running is not a particularly creative process – unless you're the chef. The restaurant had a walled courtyard surrounded by lush herbaceous borders and it was designing, establishing and maintaining those which whet my appetite for gardening. When we sold the restaurant in 2000, I embarked on a post-grad course in landscape architecture. In my final year, I won the Landscape Institute Best Student Portfolio Award for my urban park design project. It was quite an accolade and I knew then I'd made the right decision.

### HOW DID ARTEMIS COME ABOUT?

I had to do practical placements to gain experience. I met my business partner-to-be, Helen Lowery, when I was working on a garden design and she came to photograph it. She was also interested in landscape architecture and, after many conversations, we decided to go into business together.

### DOES YOUR NEW GARDENING LIFESTYLE SUIT YOU BETTER?

You have to work at 100 miles an hour in a kitchen, but design work often comes in fits and starts, so the pace is very different. I love



the unpredictability of my new career – you never know what the elements are going to throw at you and I find the constant creativity very fulfilling, so, altogether, I'm much happier now. I have two sons – Ted, four, and Tom, two – so I spend four days a week with them and I work three full days, which is perfect for me.

### AFTER SPENDING ALL DAY DESIGNING GARDENS, CAN YOU BE BOTHERED WITH YOUR OWN?

Although we do work for private clients, a lot of our projects are designs for public and community spaces, so that's very different. It's nice to have my own garden as a balance and also as a place to experiment. I have built raised beds and now I have the time to grow veg. We also have a quirky shed, which we've painted in bright stripes – the garden's an ongoing project. ■



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** Sally in her garden at home, with her sons, Tom, two (left), and Ted, four; striking tulips add vibrance; a garden sculpture; her red setter, Binks

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: CAROLE MAY FOR GARDEN COMMISSIONS. VISIT ARTEMIS.UK.NET