



In a new miniseries, **Sean Butler** questions the ethos behind the use of various products that are commonly used in the design and build of landscape projects

I was recently asked to take a look at a garden project I had priced for an SGD garden designer about six years ago. The client was very polite and wrote: "Dear Sean, you may not remember us — you didn't actually do our garden, as you were too expensive. The designer has passed your details onto us, as we cannot get hold of the landscape company that did our garden since they have gone out of business. We have a problem with the railway sleepers that retain the flower beds and steps, as you can see from the photos attached. I seem to remember you advising us to use something else, but why has this happened?"



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The reason that we were more expensive is because I had advised the client that the timber being specified would only last a maximum of four years; I asked the designer for permission to specify block and brickwork instead. The other landscape company had informed the client that the timber would last as per the



manufacturers' quote of 10-15 years, which then cast doubt over my more expensive option and my opinion on the durability.

Personally, I don't like using any of these so-called 'railway sleepers' in gardens. In addition, I call them 250mm x 100mm sectional timbers — it's misleading to call them railway sleepers when they don't actually come from a railway line and aren't intended for the construction of one. They are Tanalised, pressure impregnated to 4atm, and the manufacturers claim — as they do with softwood decking and other external-grade woods that are generally used in our industry — that they will last 10-15 years. What the manufacturers fail to say, however, is that this life expectancy only applies if they are suspended in mid-air, with no soil or ground contact, and preferably kept out of the rain.



“WHEN WILL OUR **INDUSTRY UNITE AND START OPERATING ON A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD?**”

It is up to landscapers, garden designers and specifiers to know the durability of any product, as well as its suitability for its intended use. Lateral strength is generally what 'railway sleepers' are used for, often to the detriment of the project. If you were to involve a structural engineer, they would tell you not to use them — so why are so many designers and landscapers happy to?

What should our ethos be? Surely we should all be advising the same thing? Why is there such a divide in opinion? Is it because designers are prepared to use landscapers who don't belong to one of our professional associations? Or does it come down to knowledge and experience? I believe that it is a combination of wanting to keep a project within-budget (often to its detriment), and a lack of knowledge.

When will our industry unite and start operating on a level playing field?

ABOUT SEAN BUTLER

Sean Butler is a landscape designer and director of Cube 1994. With a background in civil engineering, Sean has an in-depth understanding of the design, construction and maintenance of the physical and naturally built landscape.
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