

a DAY IN THE LIFE OF AN...

OFFICE GARDENER



Frederika Whitehead picks up her watering can and heads into work for an early start with office gardeners Anna Jones and Ian Drummond

Ian Drummond regularly transports 6m high trees through buildings travelling on top of lifts rather than inside them while Anna Jones dons waders and plunges into pools to tend waterlilies – gardening is renowned as a tranquil pastime but these gardeners’ lives are far from dull.

6.30AM I meet Anna outside the HQ of a large law firm near St Paul’s. It is still pitch dark but Anna is anxious to get cracking before the office gets busy, the upper floors have scores of meeting rooms and all the plants in them need attention before the day begins. Figs, dracaenas, mother-in-law’s tongues, song of Indias all need a drink, a trim and their leaves washing. The

black soot that comes off the leaves scares the bejeezus out of me. “Plants will absorb and neutralise a lot of the pollution in a room but their pores (stomata) do get clogged up. If we don’t clean the leaves the plant won’t be able to photosynthesise and it will die,” Anna says.

We zip from room to room; even at 8am people anxiously asking us how long we will be as they want to set up for meetings. Anna peeks through the window in one room that we can’t get into. “That’ll be ok. It’s a dracaena and they don’t drink very much.” We hurry even more and I am allowed to use the watering can, although I notice Anna sneaking back to check that I have given the plant enough: “very thirsty figs, they can drink a whole can each in the summer. Watering looks easy but you need to know the ins and outs of each plant.”

9.30AM Breakfast time. We decamp to the café next door for breakfast butties and I seek scurrilous tales that evidence debauched office life by asking Anna what the worst thing she’s ever found hidden in a plant pot is.



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1 Ted Baker HQ by Jam Design.
Planting design by Ian Drummond, Indoor Garden Design

2 Ian Drummond in the Indoor Garden Design office in Highgate

3 Anna Jones tends a song of India plant in an office near St Paul's cathedral

4 BBC Media Village by Allies & Morrison. Planting design by Ian Drummond, Indoor Garden Design

5 Banque Paribas, Marylebone. Ficus trees make up the focal point of this atrium, designed by Ian Drummond, Indoor Garden Design

"Teabags", she says, "I know it's not very exciting but tea and coffee are killers. I am always telling people off for pouring their drinks into the plant pots. They think they are being green by not wasting water but I've already watered them and the extra liquid rots the roots."

10AM

Now the that the lawyers, and their clients, are in the building I need to leave so I head back to Indoor Garden Design's office to meet colleague Ian Drummond who works with the architects on the garden designs. With the roar of the city behind me I struggle up London's Highgate Hill, which, unfortunately for me, their offices are at the very top of.

11AM

I'm half dead after the climb up the hill on my bicycle but Indoor Garden Design's office has restorative powers. It is as quiet and calm as it is possible to be, crammed with huge plants, the air is fresh and moist. I find Ian tucked away behind some giant figs. He has a desk full of pen and ink drawings, his designs for new 'living wall' planters. I imagine offices across the city with people sitting alongside soft green living walls.

He gives me a quick tour; of IGD's 55 staff, 45 are gardeners and out on site all day, the remaining 10 are quietly tapping away at their keyboards on desks wedged in amongst aisles of plants. The meeting room has one of the most impressive collections of contemporary pottery I have seen and a wall dedicated to artwork by the gardeners themselves. "Most of our gardeners have other lives. People don't realise that when they see someone in overalls watering the plants in their office but after 2.30 they are artists, actors, things like that."

12.30PM

The designs for the planters have been dispatched to the manufacturer and Ian is engrossed in a design for a roof garden for a new building by architects ttp. "We are typically involved about two years before the buildings are

finished. If the customers want tropical trees it can take us up to a year to prepare them. Plants are really upset by moving, our indoor trees come from Florida, via the Netherlands. We have to cut back the roots back as much as possible and divest 80 per cent of the foliage. They look very sorry for themselves when they arrive. They are tended and acclimatised for six months in greenhouses in the Netherlands before shipping to the UK.

Some of the plants around me are six or seven metres high. Some of the pots come up to my shoulders. "Access is our main issue, getting large plants onto upper atria. They usually have to go in before the building is finished, sometimes we use cranes, we often have to remove panels from the sides of buildings, sometimes we transport them by putting them on of the roof of the lift so they travel through the shaft, we worked out that that was the easiest and cheapest way to get the plant in. Much cheaper than hiring a crane and taking out a panel," he tells me.

2PM

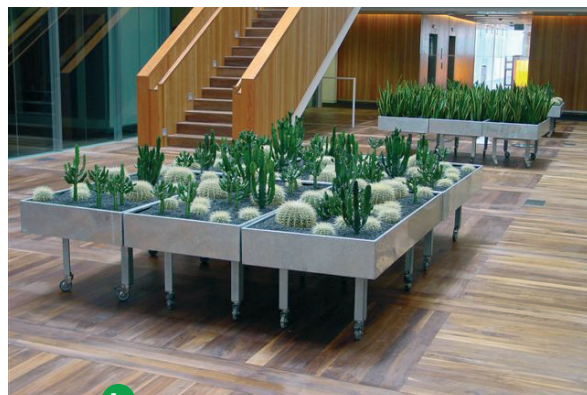
Every now and then a van arrives and someone exchanges a few pleasantries while they load up with plants. "All the plants you see here will be gone within a week." The place is packed wall to wall. "Anna puts in an order for something. It comes in from the greenhouses in the Netherlands and it goes straight back out again."

2.30PM

Architects begin to arrive for a RIBA CPD event on the contribution plants make to air quality in the internal environment. I was convinced of that even before I saw the gunk that Anna washed off the plants in St Paul's so I take my leave, there is a cheese plant at home that is about to get a long overdue bath.

Anna Jones is an interior plant maintenance technician and Ian Drummond is the creative director for Indoor Garden Design. ■

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