

# DORSET

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*Are you*  
**SITTING**  
**SPIRITUALLY?**

As Sitting Spiritually of Lyme Regis celebrates its 20th anniversary, Helen Stiles joins its founder Martin Young in the feng shui garden he created to showcase his bespoke garden furniture

PHOTOGRAPHY: Heather Edwards

The house showing the bridge to the summer house and decking area with the swinging day bed



hose heart is not warmed by the idea of spending a lazy afternoon on an elegant swing seat in a beautiful garden? Crafted from fine wood, artfully decorated, a much-loved piece to pass on to future generations for endless summers. Sitting Spiritually in Uplyme make bespoke wooden swing seats, rocking benches, rope swings, garden benches and swinging day beds, imbued with added Eastern mysticism as the designs incorporate the principles of feng shui, encouraging the flow of life force through curving shapes.

Martin Young set up the business 20 years ago and has since enjoyed repeated success exhibiting at RHS Chelsea Flower Show, where his order book filled rapidly. He has worked in wood since he became an apprentice carpenter with the City of Coventry Corporation back in the early 1960s. 'Of all of the carpentry apprenticeships this was one of the better ones as they had their own workshop,' he tells me. From there he got a job with a timber merchant. Not being a fan of working outdoors in winter weather, he moved into sales. In 2004, he was working for RMC Group when he had a health scare. 'I was overweight, driving over 40,000 miles a year for my job, and not making great choices with my diet. I was diagnosed with Metabolic Syndrome X – a combination of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes and obesity; a recipe for a heart attack. I knew I had to make some changes.'

Martin took some time out to think about what to do next. 'I had always hankered after a swing seat, like the ones you see in American films with people sitting on the porch. I couldn't find one, so I got hold of a blueprint for an American style swing seat and made it myself in the garage.' He points to the end of the garden. 'It's that white one over there. We then opened our garden for the National Gardens Scheme (NGS) and half a dozen people asked about the seat and I ended up getting orders. By the end of the year, I had quit my job and was back on the tools, which was a healthy thing to do.'

Martin also became interested in meditation and feng shui. 'Steve, who now does the carving on the seats, and lived in the bungalow next door – popped around early one morning and found me eyes shut meditating on that swing seat and asked, "Are you sitting spiritually?" I thought it was a great name and immediately bought the domain name *sittingspiritually.co.uk*, and then I built the garden and business around feng shui principles.'

For those not familiar with feng shui, this originated in Ancient China and claims to use energy forces

to harmonise individuals with their surrounding environment. 'Imagine going into an untidy chaotic garage,' says Martin. 'You spend the day clearing it, creating order, taking stuff to the tip, until everything is in its place. Feng shui feels like opening the door to that garage the following day and everything is in its right place. It has a different kind of energy.'

Martin's second swing seat design was inspired by a meditation retreat. 'It was led by Paul Darby, known as the Feng Shui Doctor. I got chatting to him about the seats and he talked about chi energy, and advised a different design,' he points towards another swing seat in the garden. 'A wishbone end top like a yoke – the design is called Kyokusen, which is Japanese for "Curves in the air". There are no sharp corners in feng shui.'

That swing seat has a personal touch too, a celebration of 30 years of marriage to his wife Celia, with a touching dedication carved into the back of the seat. Where it sits now, with underplanting and the ying yang swirl of the back, it looks like a piece of sculpture, but a very comfortable one. 'All our seats are at 105°, most benches are at 90°, so you are tipped back and want to sit for longer.'

With orders flooding in, Martin brought in more skilled carpenters to work with him. Currently he has six makers working off-site. Most of the sustainable oak they use is sourced from France. 'Some 200 years ago the French government, at the behest of Napoleon, took an active interest in planting oak for ship building, as well as wine barrels so this oak comes from managed woods, often attached to a château and looked after by the same family for generations.' Other woods used include Western Red Cedar from Canada, and Accoya an engineered timber



Martin Young on one of the Sitting Spiritually swing seats in his garden at Uplyme. Photo: Rob Coombes



The Kyokusen, Martin's first feng shui design with its dedication to Celia to mark their 30th wedding anniversary carved on its back



'Dark colours are in the north, in the south where the dragon lives you get reds and oranges like crocosmia, pinks and whites are to the west and yellows to the east'

made from sustainably grown pine, which is pickled to turn it from a soft wood into a solid piece of timber.

It would be Sitting Spiritually's arrival at RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2008 that saw things really take off. 'We were on a waiting list, then someone pulled out. The site was tucked away and on a slope from corner to corner... so we built a platform and put swing seat on it.' Over the following years they got better pitches until they arrived on Main Way.

Then in 2014 they were commissioned to make a swinging day bed with a pergola for a garden in Provence. 'We got such great feedback that we decided to make another one to take to Chelsea.' Martin pats the day bed we are chilling on. 'This one. It had some silvering from the weather as it had been outside, and garden designers Jarman Murphy planted it up for us, we've some of the roses they used in this garden.' By the end of their week at RHS Chelsea they had sold 43 swinging day beds (these currently start from around £4,000). 'We even heard from clients who slept at night in their garden on their day beds when it was hot!'

One of Martin's best sellers is the RHS Four Seasons Bench. This started as a commission for the RHS to

produce a centenary bench to reflect 100 years of the Chelsea Flower Show.

'Around the time of the first Chelsea, the Arts & Crafts movement was very strong – so we used this as our starting point.' Siobhan Lancaster, who has helped Martin run the business since 2009, brought in her brother, Paul Reeves, a renowned expert on the Arts & Crafts movement. 'Paul helped us to design the bench which had a carved rose on the back. And it was launched at Chelsea.'

Then Siobhan suggested they expand this to represent the four seasons. 'So, we now have a stylised daffodil, rose, oak leaf and snowdrop, representing spring, summer, autumn and winter, available as a bench or swing seat.'

As we sit in the garden designed to showcase the work of Sitting Spiritually, Martin reveals why he brought his young family from the Midlands down to Dorset: racing pigeons! 'I put my heart and soul into my pigeons,' he admits. 'I was quite good at it too, but Celia was fed up with me spending every weekend with the pigeons, we had two young children at the time, so one day I said why don't we swap the pigeons for a house by the sea. So, I sold 111 pigeons in 1981 for £11,000 and we bought a house in Charmouth for £25,000.'



The garden beneath the bridge featuring rosemary, *Galium oderatum*, *Cephalaria gigantea*, camassias, cardoons, euphorbia, geranium and grasses. The tree is an *Acer grinnala*

### CREATING A FENG SHUI GARDEN

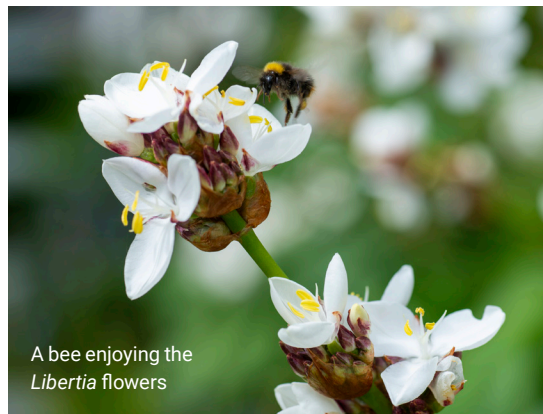
Martin and Celia moved into their current house (and Sitting Spiritually HQ) on Yawl Hill Lane in Uplyme in May 1998. Enter Ed Brooks, freshly graduated from the University of Nottingham as a landscape architect. Ed had been at school with Martin and Celia's kids in Charmouth. This was his first commission, which he undertook with his dad Dave. Martin's brief for this virgin plot, a sloping southwest facing site, was 'big deep beds.' 'The three words I took away from the garden design course I did were: form, texture and colour – and in that order. People often go for colour first, but form is more important.

'Look at these cardoons,' he sweeps his hand towards the flower bed in front of us. '*Cynara cardunculus*, a magnificent, architectural plant and the giant purple thistle-like flowers are adored by bees which get intoxicated by the nectar.'

I admire some cloud pruned shrubs, providing both form and texture. 'I like topiary and clipped stuff, this mixes with ripples of billowing perennials like those *Cammasia*.' The lower part of the garden is awash with drifts of sky-blue flowers. 'Unlike tulips, which look great the first year and then fade, *Cammasia* just get better and better.'

Martin used the feng shui colour wheel for his planting. 'Dark colours are in the north, in the south where the dragon lives you get reds and oranges like crocosmia, pinks and whites are to the west and yellows to the east.'

In 2015 Martin invited garden designers Jarman Murphy, whom he had met at Chelsea, to work on the garden. 'My brief was to connect the house to the summer house, which they did via a raised walkway to a decked area where we are sitting now.' They also introduced new perennials including *Cephalaria gigantea* (giant scabious) underplanted with the delicate fern like



A bee enjoying the *Libertia* flowers

*Thalictrum*. The garden is now tended by Anna Sissons, who studied garden design with Robin Williams (five times gold medal winner at Chelsea and Hampton Court Flower Shows), with her husband Woody, who maintains all the hedges and prunes the roses. 'He ties them in a loop which makes them bloom more,' adds Martin.

May and June are Martin's favourite months. 'The *Alba wisteria* on the summer house comes into bloom after Chelsea. We have Lady of the Lake, a repeat flowering rose in white and pink from David Austin on the pergola, and the honeysuckle 'Graham Thomas' fills the air with its perfume in the evening.

'Where we are sitting now is my special place. Whenever I meditate, I put myself in this spot, looking at this beautiful garden.' He taps his head, smiling. 'I've got a secret door to here in my mind.' ●

The Sitting Spiritually Garden is open by appointment only, please call 01297 443084. See their full range of bespoke garden furniture at [sittingspiritually.co.uk](http://sittingspiritually.co.uk).