

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a light-colored turtleneck sweater, is smiling and looking to the right. She is standing in front of a large tree of illuminated cherry blossoms at night. The blossoms are glowing with a warm, yellow light, creating a bokeh effect in the background. The woman's hair is styled in a shoulder-length cut, and she has a pleasant expression. The overall scene is romantic and serene.

DECORATIVE
LIGHTING DESIGNER
SUSIE REID THOMAS

*From her studio in Hampshire, the founder of
Twilight Trees offers illuminated designs that bring a touch
of magic to gardens, interiors and special occasions*

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Drawing on her creative background and eye for sculptural design, Susie Reid Thomas set up Twilight Trees in 2013 to provide beautiful, life-like LED-lit trees in a variety of shapes, sizes and finishes. Used either as a permanent installation or to enhance a party or special event, the trees add an enticing decorative touch both inside and out.

Can you tell us about your background? My family is very entrepreneurial; both my father and brother run their own businesses. I have always loved design and graduated from Central Saint Martins in 2000 with a degree in fashion communication and promotion. For a while I ran my own PR company, specialising in luxury goods. Then, after having our two boys, Alistair, now eight, and Rory, four, my husband and I decided to leave London for a more rural setting in Winchester. It was an ideal time for me to return to my creative roots and I started by producing sculptures out of polished cow horns from a workshop at home.

How did the idea for Twilight Trees come about? The business started by accident. A couple of years ago, I was in Hong Kong when I came across the trees and fell in love with them. I had been looking for something sculptural to place in our courtyard but, as a light source, the trees were practical as well as decorative and had a mesmerising effect, rather like staring at an open fire. I had a feeling that with a few tweaks, such as altering the colour warmth of the LEDs, they could fill a gap in the market. Friends and family soon started buying them from me and so the business was born.

Where and how are the trees made? Each tree takes about five days to make; the trunk of each piece is formed from a steel frame with a resin coating, which is sculpted to give a realistic quality to the bark and spray-painted by hand for a convincing finish. The core structure is comprised of several easily transportable sections that we put together before the branches are attached. These finer twigs contain the LEDs, which are set in the centre of each cherry blossom or at the bases of the maple leaves.

How does the lighting work? The trees are lit from a power source running from the mains via a transformer up the trunk and then into multiple wires for a magical, twinkling effect. We use the highest quality LEDs so that when the tree is switched on, you see each individual bulb sparkle rather than a bright blur. There are several sizes available, ranging from modest 1.5-metre-tall trees, which look great in large pots, to 3-metre options, which make a big impact when placed at a venue or in a garden.

Can the trees be displayed outside year round? As with a living tree that you expect to see all year and in different seasons, our trees look natural and inconspicuous as a permanent feature. We often provide trees for people who want to complement an area of their garden and subtly draw attention to it with illumination. Other clients might have a tree that has died and want to replace it with a mature plant, so our trees provide a light-hearted twist. They look enticing on urban terraces as well as being extremely energy efficient. They are also beautiful at summer weddings and festivals.

How can the trees be incorporated into a decorative Christmas scheme? At this time of year we bring our trees inside, where we decorate them with glass and mirror ornaments. Christmas is a busy period for us – the trees lend themselves very well to being a contemporary alternative to traditional options. They provide a warm light and a festive sparkle, can be easily decorated as they don't get hot, and they don't drop pine needles on the floor unlike Christmas trees. They are also wonderful for events and parties, because they produce a welcoming brightness that is neither unnatural nor harsh.

Tell us about a typical day. As with everyone who runs a small business, my days are incredibly varied. My studio is an outbuilding at home and I tend to work in two chunks of time – the first when the children are at school and the second after they have gone to bed. I try to fit in a quick run in the mornings, which helps me plan the day ahead. Since starting the business, I've become physically stronger as well as a good electrician. I work with a small team of people with specialised skills, some of

whom help me manoeuvre the heavier trees. One day I might be wearing my hi-vis jacket collecting shipments and lugging trees around on a trolley (fortunately, as we live in the countryside, we have plenty of space to store the trees for buying or rental); at other times, I am curating the trees at a glamorous event. Often I'll collaborate with other designers, florists or individuals.

Can you describe some recent projects? We are very excited to be providing the Christmas decorations for the Burlington Arcade in Mayfair this year, featuring a staggered line of trees on plinths running the entire length of the gallery, which looks amazing. Each occasion is a highlight for different reasons, from smaller, cosy family parties to grand events such as the recent Bond Street opening of Patek Philippe watches at Somerset House, which provided a breathtaking backdrop for the trees. We've also collaborated with luxury furniture brand Linley and hotels including The Ritz, the Four Seasons and Chewton Glen in Hampshire.

How has the business evolved? Initially, my aim was to sell the trees, but the rental market has since been the main driver of growth. Typically, clients who are hosting a party or wedding want to rent multiple trees, which is a cost-effective option, plus we can help to create optimal design impact. We deliver, set up and return the trees after the event, which has proved popular.

Why do you think the trees are so appealing? They are very versatile and provide an affordable way to make a big impression. The trees can be used to frame an entrance to a house, hotel or marquee, to create walkways or to cast light into a dark corner. To me, they are as captivating as a good sunset; they provide a full 3D experience, which helps to make them unique.

What are your future plans? I'd like to continue to grow the business and increase its diversity. It would be great to become the go-to specialist in the UK for LED trees. *Twilight Trees, The Courtyard, Northfields, Fair Lane, Winchester, Hampshire SO21 1HF, 01962 877644, twilight-trees.com. By appointment only.*



TOP, FROM LEFT A pair of 3m Grande Twilight Trees framing the entrance of a client's house, complemented by a 2m tree in the hall, offers an enticing welcome to visitors; an energy-efficient warm white LED is embedded in the centre of each blossom; the 3m lollipop cherry trees lining this avenue are the same design featured in the striking decoration of London's Burlington Arcade for the Christmas season this year. **ABOVE, FROM LEFT** The realistic autumn-coloured maple leaves

are subtly lit by LEDs at their bases; viewed through a dining room window, a 3m lollipop cherry tree brings a warm glow to the garden at dusk; maple trees are available in a variety of finishes, including autumn and green, shown here, as well as contemporary black and radiant white. **RIGHT** Cherry trees set at either side of the door create a wash of soft light across the rear façade of this house; with its sculptural frame and sparkling blossom, this single cherry tree makes a dramatic focal point in an entrance hall.