

Destination Chelsea

Australia is going big on trees – and fish – at the world's grandest flower show.



Words Meredith Kirton

A huge fishtank set in a wall among giant trees is the centrepiece of this year's Australian entry in the Chelsea Flower Show to be held in London in May.

Though the show is still more two months away, Mark Browning and his team are already working around the clock to get everything in order.

Even as Australia celebrated Dean Herald's gold medal in the Show Garden award at last year's show, work was already under way on this year's entry.

Organising a garden display at Chelsea – the world's most prestigious and famous flower show – takes almost a year, from submitting the initial design to the three open days in May when the final product goes on display for the Queen, the judges and the 100,000 spectators who crowd through the gates.

The first step – getting a design accepted by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) in London – is an achievement in itself. A

panel of experts meets three times to assess each application before narrowing the worldwide list down to just 20 show gardens.

Then there is the extra challenge involved in designing, building and organising a garden from the other side of the world.

The total cost of bringing a display like this to Britain is about \$500,000, but most of this isn't the garden, which will be on show for only five days, but the cost of transport, accommodation and logistics.

Already the team (which, along with Browning, includes Wes Fleming, head of Fleming's

Nurseries, the principal sponsor of the entry, and Tim Sprague, the project manager) has been on numerous trips to Britain – organising accommodation and transport, locating plants, negotiating with nurseries and sponsors, and liaising with the RHS. Browning is confident everything is progressing well.

Much of the garden structure and decoration is being shipped from Melbourne, Browning's base, and with the containers due to leave in three weeks, packing is now paramount.

Among the items on board are key components of the fishtank, an enormous water fea-

ture and a prefabricated pergola, which has been flatpacked ready to be assembled on site.

Shipping plants is not an option in most cases, so most will come from nurseries in England and Europe.

Browning's design calls for 40 trees over six metres tall, including a copse of purple-leaved weeping beech at a cost of £1,200 (\$2,000) each, which are being sent over from Spain, several white-barked birch and a large dragon tree as a central feature. He hopes the contrasting foliage, a mixture of burgundy, green and grey with the unusual spiky texture of the dragon tree, will inspire average homeowners to put trees back into their gardens.

"People are ripping out trees much faster than they're being replaced," he says. "[They have become] afraid of dropping leaves or litigation."

This, he says, is a classic example of people not seeing the wood for the trees. The resulting treeless urban landscape looks rushed and bare.

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Show man ... Mark Browning will use 40 trees over six metres tall in his garden display. Photo: Eddie Jim