



Behind the Chelsea 'gold'

Raising the credibility of Australian horticulture

We were all very proud to hear that "the Aussies" had won another gold medal at the Chelsea Flower and Garden Show. But how many of us actually stop and think about what it takes to get that gold medal? Karen Smith caught up with Wes Fleming at the show to find out a little more about what happens behind the scenes.

KS: Congratulations! You have done Australia proud once again. How are you feeling having just found out you are a gold medal winner?

WF: Absolutely fantastic! 13 months in the planning, 16 days, 21 people, minimum 14 hour days to build - the amount of dedication, commitment and heart required to build this garden was all worthwhile.

KS: Tell us a little about the criteria of the judging and what you think were the main criteria that gave you gold?

WF: Judging is about translating the design to perfection. A

BBC producer asked me for my one tip on building a Chelsea garden, a tip that could be given to people thinking about submitting a design, my tip was 'it's never good enough, if you can improve it, do it!'

KS: HRH Queen Elizabeth stopped by your stand. What did she say to you?

WF: Meeting the Queen for the fourth time is truly amazing. I introduced her to Jamie Durie, Ian Barker and Scott Tymkin, and then asked Jamie to tell her a little about the design, and we then walked her majesty to the front of our garden where I



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presented her with a Gabriella Possum original canvas. Her Majesty was extremely interested and, I felt, quite touched about the story of Gabby's father at Buckingham Palace in 1962.

KS: The Patio design clearly represents Australia. How important was it that you had a design that put not just your company, but our country in the spotlight?

WF: We have exhibited at Chelsea now for the past five years and all our designs have represented Australia beautifully. The English are quite fascinated (and extremely jealous) of our designs, based on functional space, jealous of our climate and culture. Patio's design represented this perfectly.

KS: How important is it for our industry to be recognised internationally?

WF: I do not know how important it is to be recognised internationally, but it is of paramount importance that we are recognised domestically! The horticulture industry needs to be involved in the biggest issue we face currently - climate change. We also need to play a greater part in town planning, ensuring that we all live in the healthiest environments possible.

KS: You had to source most of the plants from Europe; how difficult was that, bearing in mind that you had to go and look at many of the plants to ensure they were in good condition?

WF: Sourcing plants from Europe always has an element of trepidation about it. No matter how often we fly over to look at the stock, or how many emails we send, every year we are let down in some way. This year the original design had some stunning Casuarina in the garden, but on a visit three days prior to them being shipped from Rome to London, we



discovered that their 'heads' had been totally lopped off, making them unusable. We had some anxious days trying to find suitable replacements and ended up with some Callistemon salignus that did the trick.

KS: The planning and organisation of the whole event would come with some hiccups. What were the biggest hurdles you had to overcome?

WF: Ian Barker and Associates' principals, Ian Barker and Scott Tymkin, had nearly everything planned to the minute; it was an amazing effort to project manage the logistics of such a build. However, we still had some major concerns.

The curved timber was bent in Victoria prior to leaving. We picked it up the day before it was to be packed into the





container, unfortunately it was so poorly done that we had to re-do the entire deck in situ at Chelsea. The banding water feature did not arrive, so Ian came up with the concept of carving it out of hebel. It was a work of art by the time he finished.

For the first time in five years our containers did not arrive on time and we had to beg, borrow and steal tools to enable us to get the site set out, the excavation done and pour the concrete. Luckily all the people involved at Chelsea are a part of the whole event, helping each other is part and parcel of Chelsea.

KS: How many people are on the team? Tell us a little about them.

WF: We had 21 people on the team this year, too many to mention individually.

Ian Barker and Scott Tymkin, partners in Ian Barker and Associates, were totally under control. Their team left nothing to chance - thoroughly professional.

Scott Wynd, well Scott doesn't really have a title within the team. Scott's company TLC Landscapes built the first ever Gold medal Australian garden, Jack Merlo's 'Float'. Scott has been an integral part of the team for the past four years. He



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assists the construction team with his knowledge of the ins and outs of Chelsea.

Atkinson-Pontifex, builders from Melbourne's bayside area, built the decking this year, David Pontifex spent 10 days on the curved decking, it's a masterful job.

KS: It has obviously been a huge expense for you to make this journey. Did you have any support from sponsors or industry bodies in Australia? If so, who and how did they support you.

WF: We have some great sponsors, relationships that have been built over the years.

• Trailfinders, a UK travel company, was joint naming rights sponsor with Fleming's Nursery. A pleasure to deal with, the team at Trailfinders enjoy being part of the journey, the experience; it is

just not about the return on investment for them, it's far greater than that.

- The Victorian Government have been great over the five years.
- Tourism Australia have been a minor supporter (hopefully we can get them more involved in the future)
- Orica Woodcare with Intergrain came on board for the first time this year and we hope that it has been a great tool for them.
- Van Schaik's BioGro have supported Flemings for years, we owe them a great deal of thanks.

Unfortunately none of the Australian / Victorian industry bodies have contributed to the project.

KS: What are the benefits of taking on this challenge, for you, your business and our industry?

WF: Fleming's Nursery, from the very first year, has seen this as an opportunity to raise the profile and credibility of the horticulture industry here in Australia.

We have seen that a by-product of the project is an increase in our brand awareness, but being a wholesaler I do not envisage that our sales can ever increase to the point of

covering the cost of this event. We see it as a philanthropic cost for the benefit of the industry as a whole.

KS: Jamie Durie has been very successful with his company Patio and more recently with his appearances on the Oprah Winfrey Show. Given your success at Chelsea, do you think teaming up with Jamie will help raise the profile of Australian designers internationally?

WF: *Absolutely!*

KS: Between you and Jamie you have given Australians plenty of 'bragging rights' Is there anything you would like to 'brag' about? Don't be modest - you have earned the right to brag.

WF: *At our team celebration after we had won gold, I spoke to the team about our accomplishment, and what we had achieved. I then proposed a toast to 'The Australian horticulture industry' equal to if not the best in the world! That is what we should all brag about!*

KS: How do you think Australian landscape designers are perceived internationally?

WF: *I have been told by designers from all around the world that Australian garden design is 'cutting edge', leading the world, and you can actually see our influence creeping in to other Chelsea garden designs every year.*

KS: The trend in the UK is towards drought tolerant plants and

certainly there are Australian native plants being used throughout Europe. Do you think that they will look to us as 'experts' when it comes to using drought tolerant plants and saving water?

WF: *Without question, Australia is perceived as gardening without any water at all. We can lead the way.*

KS: I recently visited The Eden Project in Cornwall, which has been described as the eighth wonder of the world. Mostly it is about sustainability and our future. Tim Smit, the founder of the project, has built a facility that is not only an outstanding educational centre, but a wonderful legacy for future generations. What does Wes Fleming want to be remembered for, what legacy would you like to leave Australians?

WF: *That's an easy one, but very long-winded. In short, I would like to be remembered for leading the fight for making our urban environments truly sustainable, sustainable on many levels, because sustainability can mean different things to different people and different industries.*

Another is for 'keeping the bastards honest'. Today we are bombarded with the words 'green', 'sustainable' and 'environmental', but these words will become useless in the future unless they have a criteria attached to them before anyone can use them in advertising, promotion etc. I feel that the horticulture industry needs to lead this area.