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The magic of trees is never far away



How to be Urban tree crusader Wes Fleming

WHEN I was about to complete year 11 and thinking about a career in law, my father took me aside and told me that as a family-run company we could always hire plenty of lawyers but finding good nurserymen was difficult.

So at 17 I left school and started a career as a third-generation wholesale nurseryman in the business, Fleming's Nurseries.

I have been playing with trees for almost as long as I can recall; in fact I had earned a tidy profit in pocket money growing root stock and selling it back to my father before I was old enough to drive, so it followed that my passion for horticulture would last a lifetime.

When I was about 28 I decided a formal qualification might be a good idea and I started a degree in horticulture. Ultimately, I found I had far more life experience than the course could offer, so I left before I completed the certificate — something I have never regretted.

As my role in the company grew, I embarked on a business degree part-time, feeling that a greater understanding of business would be valuable.

Whereas a large proportion of our sales had traditionally been derived from bare-root tree sales during winter, in my early 30s I identified the emerging opportunity for year-round sales of ready-potted trees.

In the early '90s I established our container nursery, and we have expanded production to include selected shrubs as well as trees.

Throughout this period I

welcomed my three children into the world — Jess, Jake and my youngest Todd — and while my marriage broke down, the bond I have with my children is very special.

In 2001 I pulled a team of industry people together to create the Australian Street Tree Evaluation Program, which aims to evaluate trees in-situ within urban areas, to identify which trees are able to cope with the urban condition and to disseminate the findings throughout the horticulture industry.

In the late '90s we initiated the Don Fleming Student Design Competition, named after my father and held annually in association with the Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show. I believe it's a really important way to reinforce the value of a horticulture career.

I have a number of soapboxes that are really important to me. One is bringing our industry together for its greater good, especially on important political issues that effect us. Another is the urban environment.

After identifying a trend towards sparsely treed urban areas in Melbourne's fringe growth corridors, I formed a division called "Habitude" in 2004, designed as a one-stop-shop for the development industry.

That same year saw our first entry to the world famous Chelsea Flower Show. The project is something I value as a positive news story for the horticulture industry.

At a time when drought is wreaking havoc across our industry, with water restrictions deterring

CV

Born 1962.

Educated Moribulk High School.

Jobs Practically everything — from the potting shed, truck driver, pruner, bare-root nurseryman, potting container manager and, now, joint director with my brother Graham, all at Fleming's Nurseries.

Career highs Meeting the Queen for the first time in 2004; being asked to open an art exhibition in 2007; and seeing my youngest son enter the nursery industry as one of our fourth-generation Flemings.

Influence While family business can be difficult at times, I have learnt a great deal from my mother and father and their passion and dedication to the business.

people from planting and enjoying their gardens, and with the growing lack of understanding as to the value of green space in our urban environment, the show helps the industry gain positive media coverage.

This year's entry with Jamie Durie and Patio, together with landscapers Ian Barker and Associates, will be our fifth Chelsea garden and this time we're going for best in show.

I have found that although life as a lawyer might have been great, I have been fulfilled with so much more in life from my choice to play with trees. There are no downsides to what I do.

I have met the Queen on several occasions, work with the industry's most talented people and know I will make an impact on Australians' lives through the improvement of urban environments.

PAUL EDWARDS