

Chelsea dream put on hold

THE Chelsea Flower Show has had a reputation as a famous but fairly sedate gardening event on the British horticultural calendar.

Until 2004, that is, when Monbulk nurseryman Wes Fleming entered his first design in the prestigious show garden category of this premier floral pageant.

Every year since, Fleming's voluble patter has entertained fellow exhibitors, the British media and visitors alike over the five-day event. The only time he clammed up was when he met the Queen.

With three gold medals and two silver-gilts to his credit for his show gardens, designed by landscape luminaries such as Jack Merlo and Jamie Durie, Fleming has had to postpone this year's entry until 2010.

Citing the global economic downturn and a fire at Taggart on Black Saturday that destroyed a third of his trees, he has opted to stay home and concentrate on his nursery business.

Exhibiting at Chelsea is costly, with last year's design by Jamie Durie totalling \$800,000.

This included shipping materials to London (including Kimberley stone to make the retaining wall), plants and trees (many of them mature) and construction of the design by a team of 20 landscape contractors.

Given Fleming's competitive nature — he is determined to take out the coveted best-in-show garden at Chelsea "and beat the Brits at their own game", as he loves to say — missing the second-oldest flower

show in the world (Philadelphia is the oldest) is not something he relishes.

Fleming had chosen Scott Wynd, part of his Chelsea construction team for the past two years, to design this year's exhibit, but that is now on hold.

"Naturally, Scott's very disappointed, but the Royal Horticultural Society over there has been very supportive and has guaranteed me a site for 2010," Fleming says.

"It's been a ridiculous year with the economy and the bushfires, and we just can't cope with the losses we've had."

The flower show, which starts on May 19, will be a quieter affair without the indefatigable Fleming spruiking his wares.

But Australia will be represented by



Wes Fleming puts his Chelsea dreams on hold.

PICTURE: GARY MEDLICOTT

Will Wilson with his whimsical bronze birdbaths and bowls decorated with a variety of birds, including cockatoos and ducks.

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