



SINGAPORE GARDEN FESTIVAL 2006

STORY AND PHOTOS **JIM FOGARTY HON. FELLOW AILDM**

Last December I had the pleasure of being involved as a designer at the first **Singapore Garden Festival**. The idea behind the show was to hand pick 'Best of Show' designers from around the world. Countries including the U.K, France, Holland, Australia, the U.S.A, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, China and Japan were all represented. As well as Show Gardens, there were Floral Exhibits and a new category called Fantasy Gardens which were a melting pot of both floral, and show gardens with some added theatrics.

Australia was well represented. **Richard Go** was in the floral category, **Joby & Carolyn Blackman** (Vivid Design) were doing a Fantasy Garden, and **Jamie Durie** and I were exhibiting in the Show Garden section.

The Singapore National Parks Board (Nparks) had carefully observed many shows around the world, including the **Melbourne International Flower & Garden Show, Sydney In Bloom**, and the world famous Chelsea Flower Show in London. Greg Hooten from *IMG* Australia was consulted and his expertise proved valuable in the birth of the Singapore Garden Festival.

Once selected, all the show garden and fantasy garden designers were brought to Singapore for a 3 day briefing in April 2006. As well as being introduced to the show concept, we were briefed by **AVA** (Singapore quarantine), **Translink** (freight handling), and Pico who were the appointed event hire and infrastructure company. Nparks briefed us that they wanted the international designers to create something indicative of their own cultures, and especially to include plant life not commonly seen in Singapore. Packed into mini vans we were taken to many nurseries both in Singapore and also in Johor (Malaysia) to inspect availability of plant material in the region.

Before we left Singapore, each designer was appointed a Singaporean contractor. Matching up was done by pulling names out of a hat; which was the best way to avoid any bias. The trip was a great way to meet and get to know some of the world's top designers, especially being able to share a few drinks and a few laughs in a foreign country together.

My challenge was to design an Australian garden which was to be constructed by a Singaporean contractor. I must admit, I found this quite difficult as I had just finished at MIFGS where I did a Singaporean Garden, and the visit to Singapore instilled so much Asian inspiration into my mind that I was sent initially on the wrong design track. Struggling to get my head around an Australian design influence, I decided the best thing to do was to go bush for a few days. My wife and I went bushwalking up near Gembrook (Victoria) where I was able to soak in the atmosphere of the Australian forests, taking many images with my camera to use as later inspiration.

It worked. A few great things came out of this for me. Firstly, that I wanted a design which was modern. I wanted to represent the 3 main geographical aspects of Australia (forests, rivers & oceans, and the outback), and thirdly, after examining closely the make up of a *Banksia* flower, I came up with the idea of having a central feature light, inspired by this magnificent flower. A lime green fluorescent fungus on the bark of Eucalypt trees was also photographed as a potential paint colour for the garden. The design started to flow for me, and over the following 2 months this was developed and detailed into the final drawings for the contractor.

The finished garden was titled '**One Country**' and was inspired by a Midnight Oil song of the same name. In the video clip for the song, an endless panorama of Ken Duncan images are screened giving an inspiring insight into the many faces and geographical features that make up Australia.

I knew that plants were very important for this International Show. I had seen that **Warners** nursery in Melbourne had increased their range of Australian plants. Wollemi Pine by pure chance phoned me to discuss any opportunities of getting International exposure. Having Wollemi Pine as unique trees would be a winner.

I visited Singapore again in July 2006 to meet with my contractor. We drove up to Johor (Malaysia) to look for trees and plants that could be sourced locally. We found some great *Araucaria* sp. (Norfolk Island Pine) as well as some *Leptospermum* sp. and *Melaleuca* sp. At another nursery there were some *Xanthorrhoea* spp. As I knew I could get some good trees and large plants locally, the garden was starting to take shape in my head.

At the same time, to assist **Julian Dowle** (UK designer), I was organising his garden for him which was a smaller version of the garden he designed that won Best in Show at Chelsea in 2005. At one point, I was liaising with Julian and his thatcher in the UK, speaking to **Steve Young** from **Balistyle** in Gosford NSW to organise a shipment of straw from Indonesia. The straw was to be shipped to a Chinese contractor in Singapore, to build Julian's English garden; all organised by an Australian in Melbourne! It doesn't get more international than that.

The build up period for the show was 10 days and the event was held at the Suntec Convention Centre. As load in doors were huge, the air conditioning could not be turned on until the last 3 days of build up, which meant that most of the construction had to be done in extremely hot and humid conditions (although it was a saving grace not being out in the torrential tropical rain!)



The planting crew including Mark Hill and my wife Victoria (above) 'One Country' (top and below)





'One Country'



Being indoors, the days and nights blended together and with no sunset to guide us to finish each day we often didn't finish until 2am. Working with non English speaking workers was challenging and at times frustrating and it was difficult explaining that show garden techniques are often different from normal construction. Much of the time I had to just oversee everything that was happening to correct mistakes and make sure the garden was being built as per the design.

The last couple of days of build up, **Mark Hill** (AILDM & Boral student competition winner) arrived to experience working on a show garden. I threw him straight in the deep end as a team leader to a gang of Bangladeshi workers. Mark soon became an invaluable team member and by making the most out of the experience I think gained much from his time in Singapore. In fact, at one stage, as our contractor struggled, **Melissa King** from the **Garden Gurus** even came down for a morning to help out with mulching. The spirit of goodwill was alive and kicking.

The biggest headache was flying the Australian plant stock to Singapore. In a 10 day build up period every part of the garden runs to a very tight timeline in order to meet the deadline for judging. The Melbourne plant stock arrived at Tullamarine airport

(Melb) on schedule but was told it needed to go back to the nursery to be drenched again! This meant a delay of 3 days as the load needed to be re booked on another flight. I was on site with most other gardens completed waiting for my Australian Plant stock to arrive. With the help of Nparks the plants were sped through Singapore Customs and Quarantine and eventually arrived on site only 40 hours before judging. The freight cost alone for the plants was nearly \$40,000. Under pressure and working until 2am again, we managed to get the planting completed the night before judging. It was certainly a very close call.

The morning of Judging, the Prime Minister of Singapore, **Mr. Lee Hsien Loong** (Prime Minister and Minister for Finance) inspected the show and met the designers. Ministers in Singapore are revered and respected like royalty so this was a very big deal and it was a great moment to meet the most important Singaporean.

Gardens had to be finished by 12 noon Friday Dec 15th. At 6.30pm we returned for the Gala Night and awards ceremony to find that the medals had been attached to all site signs. As I approached my garden I was delighted to see it had a gold medal stuck on it. But there was more....as well it had the **Royal Horticultural Society (UK)** Award of Excellence stuck on it! (The RHS award for Horticultural Excellence was awarded for the best garden display and was the first ever RHS award given outside the UK)

In fact, all Australians did very well. **Richard Go** was awarded a Silver medal in Floral, Vivid Design got Gold in Fantasy Gardens, and **Jamie Durie** also got Gold in Show Gardens. There were celebrations all around and it was great to see Australian design and Australian plants do so well at an International Show.

For me, doing the Singapore Garden Festival was a great life experience. Not only have I forged many friendships around the world, but I have also developed a great respect for a country that invests in and takes pride in their gardens and horticulture. Without the Singapore Government's foresight this show would never have happened.