

The Seasoned professional

Winning isn't everything to landscape design star Charlie Albone, but it has laid the foundation for a blossoming career, NICOLE BITTAR discovers





If you thought gardening was a relaxing pursuit, you haven't met Charlie Albone.

Contrary to the practice of patience, trial and error in embracing the seasons and their natural elements, the multi-awarded Chelsea Flower and Garden Show recipient, LifeStyle Channel's landscape design expert and television host of *Selling Houses Australia*, *Chelsea's Greatest Garden 2013*, *Charlie And The Flower Show* and *The Party Garden*, Charlie also juggles a thriving landscaping business and young family.

"I got in last night at 10 o'clock after finishing a TV makeover in Brisbane and I'm in Sydney now. I've been at work all day and it's my birthday today."

Many happy returns to the constant gardener in his pursuit of *botanicus perfectus*.

"The way I balance it [career and personal life] is that I love what I do, so it doesn't feel like work," he says.

"I think my kids understand that and I try to involve them as much as I can, as well; and when I travel internationally for work, I always take them with me. You find a way."

Being driven has its rewards.

"It's funny. I said at the beginning of our interview that gardening is not competitive, and [Chelsea] is trying to make gardening somewhat competitive," he laughs.

"I wanted to go to the Chelsea Flower and Garden Show, the pinnacle of landscape design, I guess. I first started going because I wanted to win gold medals, but I quickly realised that it's much more enjoyable if you just go and enjoy the experience of going to the other side of the world, building a garden, focusing on that," he says, "and also inspiring other people who come to see the show and being inspired by all the press that goes around, much more than winning medals."

The first year Charlie entered at the Chelsea Flower and Garden Show in 2015, he won a silver-gilt medal for "The Time In Between", a garden designed as a tribute for his late father, whom Charlie lost when he was 17.

"It was really a celebration of life, that garden," he says. "I wanted to create a space where I could meet with him and tell him about my life."

More than 18 months in the planning and implementation, the tri-sectional design features an entry space of beautiful, romantic plantings, in

celebration of life; a water feature in the second part, which can empty in seconds, reflects on emotions attached to loss; and the rear of the garden is an intimate area to ponder deeper meanings, yet ultimately connect and communicate with loved ones.

"Sandstone pillars represented the important people in my life and a sunken firepit, which represented my wife, was where I could sit and talk with my father," Charlie says.

He broke records for Australia the following year, also scooping a silver-gilt medal for a garden designed for a corporate Melbourne couple. It was inspired by the architectural angles of Federation Square and featured a sunken lawn, Acacia and emu bush.

That same year, a Melbourne design duo created a red sea of 30,000 handcrafted poppies, which were provided by 50,000 volunteers, in homage to their fathers, who were World War II veterans.

Appearing to a full house at his World of Style Masterclass in August, Charlie was not only fresh faced and impeccably attired in a silver-blue blazer, crisp white shirt, navy trousers and pocket kerchief, but a seasoned professional.

A PowerPoint slide presentation displayed his landscape designs and awarded Chelsea Flower and Garden Show entries to winning effect.

"One of the terrible things about my job is having to go to Europe to source plants," he quips. More than 3500 varieties featured in his first entry and 3000 in the second. The feeling that he yearns to return in his quest for glory is palpable.

"People ask if I'm going to enter again at Chelsea and I always say: 'Have you got some money for me? I only need about \$800,000'."

He also jokes about being on a first-name basis with royals Prince William and Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge, becoming acquainted at the Chelsea Flower and Garden Show.

Charlie says when the Prince asked the name of Buxus hedge in the second silver-gilt entry, he turned to the Duchess and exclaimed: "Babe, we've got loads of these in the garden".

Being born in Hong Kong and raised in England from age 12 before moving to Australia at age 18 has not only given Charlie a range and abundance of botanical inspirations, but also proud antipodean roots ("I call Australia



CHARLIE'S TOP GARDENING TIPS

- 1 "The first one: work out what style of garden you want. Find inspiration from a variety of sources. Don't just jump in and start doing it "because you will end up with a higgledy-piggledy finished product".
- 2 "Don't overlook your soil, particularly in Australian gardens because it gives plants everything they need, so it's important to get that right."
- 3 "Don't be afraid to ask others for advice: gardening is one of those great things where people are more than happy to impart knowledge. It's not competitive and people want to see everybody do well and enjoy it as much as they do."
- 4 "Budget has to come into it early on in the piece. You have to think how much you are willing to invest. You have to make sure your aims are realistic, but also to achieve the desired goal."
- 5 "There has to be an overriding theme of what you want to get out of the garden and that may mean focusing on some areas more than others if the budget isn't there to do it all."



home"). A beautifully spoken English accent belies but also gives rise to his adopted country.

"Everyone thinks of Hong Kong as being high rise everywhere, but we lived in the countryside, outside of Hong Kong, and that obviously influenced me," Charlie says.

"When we moved to the UK, I had horses, so being outside is something I've always loved."

Home is a five-acre (2.02ha) block on the NSW Central Coast, although he and his family (Charlie's wife, interior designer and television host Juliet Love, and their two sons, aged four and two) are based in Sydney during the week.

A love of gardening is a family affair.

"The kids are out in the garden with me whenever they can," he says.

"They love it as well; they enjoy the planting and watching it grow. We do certain things for them and certain things for me and it keeps them entertained."

Charlie's creative vision extends to unlimited scope in his perception of landscape designs.

"I love all sorts of gardens. That's what inspires me because everything is different and has its individual beauty and I love seeing different garden styles and the way people have done things," he says.

Although he works less outside and more in the office, Charlie relishes the industry's possibilities of what can be imagined, achieved in a set space and accomplished through the design process.

His company is called Inspired Exteriors, but the landscape designer is a firm believer in blending outdoors with the interior for maximum effect.

"The way that people are living these days is totally different to the way it has been in the past, and it's so important to have that inside/outside connection," he says.

"We are blessed in this country to have such a fantastic climate, so it makes perfect sense to combine the two."

Keeping the greenery inside alive and thriving is anathema to outdoor gardening, Charlie suggests.



"Indoor planting is tricky," he says. "Unlike planting in the garden, you must get the right plant in the right spot for it to succeed."

Inside planting, however, requires greater delicacy and forethought.

outside planting, with its layered appearance.

Despite the increasing uptake of vertical gardens, Charlie advises caution because, while they can look spectacular upon installation, he counters that they

in the industry all our lives and I want to be enjoying this. That's why I'm doing landscaping'," he says. "I'm not doing it for the money because there is no money in landscaping. I'm doing it because it's a career I want to enjoy, so



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— Charlie Albone

"You need plants that don't need much natural sunlight; something that can withstand drought, unless you're an avid waterer," he says.

For the H2O averse, Charlie recommends Zanzibar Gem.

"The label says it thrives on neglect and it really does."

He also advocates the use of lady palms to imbue a similar effect to

require "huge amounts of maintenance".

A thriving business, Inspired Exteriors was ultimately born from frustration.

While studying horticulture and landscape design at TAFE, Charlie was labouring for a landscaper who forbade verbal communication on the job.

"He was very strict on working as hard as you could and I thought, 'This isn't what I want to be doing. We work

I started my own business to work the way that I wanted to work."

His plan bore fruit. The company is based in Sydney, but also conducts work in Melbourne, Brisbane and throughout the world, according to demand and to suit varying budgets.

Inspired Exteriors recently completed a large-scale project in Hong Kong and Singapore for the Shangri-La Hotel.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Charlie Albone charmed the Porter Davis World of Style Masterclass last month
Image: NERIDA PHELAN

ABOVE

The second award-winning garden by Charlie from the Chelsea Flower and Garden Show

There's never a dull moment when toiling outside for the Hong Kong-born Charlie, who is working the way he wants to work



"But we're also doing a small courtyard, four metres by four metres, in Sydney, an eight-acre (3.2ha) project that we're designing in the Gold Coast and everything in between," he says.

Silvers, blues and green hues feature to artistic effect in many of Charlie's striking designs.

His rock 'n' roll reference: "deep-purple plants sing on a hot summer's day, given the UV factor in this country" was music to the ears of green thumbs in attendance at the World of Style Masterclass.

Charlie also says his family mainly entertains at night, so it's important to get the garden lighting right.

"Look at what you want to show off and illuminate them so that they're not in your face," he says.

A young master with nature as his palette, he has even dyed water black to reflect foliage at its dazzling best.

Speaking of leading lights, he cites influences such as British gardening great Alan Titchmarsh, whom Charlie refers to as "the Graham Ross of the UK".

"He's a huge inspiration, just because he was the first one to do a

garden renovation show (on television) and inspire people" in all matters horticultural.

Charlie says he was lucky enough to participate as a volunteer in the creation of a garden dedicated to Titchmarsh several years ago at the Chelsea Flower and Garden Show.

"I went there to gain hands-on experience and worked for a month for free. I got to meet him and work beside him, which was really interesting and fascinating."

Diarmuid Gavin, an Irish landscape designer of surrealist proportions, is also inspirational in that his work was unlike anything Charlie had seen.

"Not that I particularly would want to do his style for any of my clients," Charlie counters. "Yes, let's put a crane somewhere and have a hanging Garden of Babylon!"

"The garden he (Diarmuid) built at Chelsea when I was there last time encompassed a roof that was going up and down, topiary spinning around, mad music playing, and it was totally out there. And I think that's fantastic."

Trend-setting in the extreme.

Yet harking back to the art of patience

and cyclical traditions, slavish attention to fads is a notion that Charlie shuns.

"Gardening should never be about trends, but always about the person who owns the garden: what do they like and get enjoyment from? That's what a garden should be," he says. "Trends just come and go too quickly."

Charlie's idealised Garden of Eden would encompass absolute seclusion.

"If money were no object, I'd become a recluse and never leave the garden," he laughs.

Leaning towards a formal layout, albeit with rustic elements that inspire relaxation, would bring to the fore every aspect that Charlie loves about landscape design.

"I'd also complete all the jobs that I've started in my own garden and be halfway there." ■

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The dapper Charlie Albone believes a garden should reflect its owner's personality and highlight what they enjoy
Image: NERIDA PHELAN

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