

244

exhibitors took part in the first edition of the Chelsea Flower Show, which was held in 1913. The total number of exhibitors at the 2014 edition of the show was 550. The event, which takes 25 days to set up, attracts about 160,000 people to the grounds of the Chelsea Hospital each year

2004

is the year that Hortus Conclusus, a contemporary garden sponsored by Sheikh Zayed and designed by the British landscape designer Christopher Bradley-Hole, won Chelsea's coveted Best in Show award. Bradley-Hole designed a total of three Chelsea gardens for Sheikh Zayed



Past Chelsea gardens sponsored by Sheikh Zayed and designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole: clockwise from top left, Garden from the Desert, with lettering, as seen from behind, that translates as 'Let's try'; Hortus Conclusus; and In the Grove. Getty Images

Putting on a show

The Dubai-based landscape designer Kamelia Bin Zaal will create a garden for Chelsea Flower Show 2015, building on already-strong links between the event and the UAE, writes **Nick Leech**

It may be a very British institution, as much a part of the social season as Royal Ascot and the Henley Regatta, but to its many devotees, the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show, or "Chelsea" as it's more popularly known, is the highlight of the horticultural year.

For five days each May, the British passion for gardening and the show's prestigious, central London location draws an eclectic, 160,000-strong crowd. The public, royalty, celebrities, the media and big beasts from the worlds of politics and business rub shoulders in the normally seclude grounds of Sir Christopher Wren's Royal Hospital to watch an international cast of designers, nurserymen, landscapers and florists battle it out for that most coveted of horticultural awards, a Chelsea gold medal.

The show may be more than a century old, but next year's event will include an important debut: it will be the first to feature a show garden designed by an Emirati. "I had goose bumps when I opened the [acceptance] letter," says the Dubai-based garden designer Kamelia Bin Zaal. "It's difficult to explain to people who don't know, but Chelsea is like the Oscars for landscape design.

"It's exciting, but it's also quite intimidating because it's so well established. This is Chelsea. It's

the Royal Horticultural Society and the people involved are my mentors. There's a lot that goes with that."

Called The Beauty of Islam, Bin Zaal's design is a contemporary reinterpretation of an Islamic garden and has been accepted as one of the 15 main show gardens that will compete for Chelsea's ultimate prize, the Best Show Garden award.

Featuring stainless-steel arches, silver walls and a hard landscape of white marble and mother of pearl, The Beauty of Islam will also include Arabic calligraphy and extracts from *Flock of Mearings*, a poem written by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, in honour of Sheikh Zayed, the founding President of the UAE. If Bin Zaal's decision to include poetry in her garden was partly inspired by a book, *The Calligrapher's Garden* by the Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudy, her choice of plants reflects the spread of Islam and Arab culture and the growth of the early Arab empire through trade and along the Spice Route. The Beauty of Islam will be planted with species that reflect that broad heritage, including jasmine, rosemary, orange, pomegranate, olive and papyrus.

"The inspiration for this garden was simply to share true Is-

lamic and Arab culture with the world," Bin Zaal explains. "With so much negativity in the media and the world today, this was an opportunity to try to break all the misconceptions about Islam and to show people what it's really about, through the beauty of garden design."

Bin Zaal may be new to designing Chelsea show gardens, but she's no stranger to their scale or the required quality of their materials and finishes. As the creative landscape director of Al Barari Firm Management, The Beauty of Islam's sponsor, Bin Zaal has been designing private gardens and landscapes in the UAE for more than eight years – in many ways, the Chelsea design resembles her commercial work.

"The concept behind The Beauty of Islam is that it's a garden for a couple without children who live in a private villa in Dubai," says Bin Zaal. "It's a garden that's designed to provide them with a place to relax, a sanctuary, that will really tickle the senses."

Al Barari's involvement will make Bin Zaal's appearance at Chelsea a family affair. She's the eldest daughter of the company's founder, the plant-loving entrepreneur Zaal Mohammed Zaal; alongside her siblings, most of whom work for Al Barari, she is responsible for the landscapes associated with two of the UAE's most



elaborate residential schemes: the Dh15 billion Al Barari development in Dubai's Nad Al Sheba and Abu Dhabi's exclusive Nurai Island, 10 minutes off the coast of Saadiyat.

In May, Bin Zaal was one of the judges for the inaugural Dubai International Garden Competition (DIGC), and it was while she was

showing her fellow judges around the gardens and private villas at Al Barari that she first considered entering a design for the 2015 Chelsea show. David Dodd, a member of the RHS Chelsea show garden-selection panel, and Jo Thompson, a Chelsea gold-medal-winning garden designer, were also on the DIGC judging panel,

and it was they who suggested that Bin Zaal should compete for the garden designer's ultimate prize.



Left, the landscape designer Kamelia Bin Zaal and, above, her design for The Beauty of Islam, her garden for the 2015 Chelsea Flower Show. Photos courtesy Al Barari

"I found the idea quite intimidating," Bin Zaal recalls, "but it did give me self-confidence a boost and eventually I thought: 'Why not?'"

A master landscaper, Dodd has constructed 15 medal-winning gardens at the show, and it's his company, The Outdoor Room, that will be the main contractor

for The Beauty of Islam. Bin Zaal also took Thompson up on her offer and worked at the flower show this year as a volunteer.

"I got my hands dirty," Bin Zaal explains. "Jo had two gardens this year, and I was shifting plants, planting, snipping off dead leaves, everything that was needed. It was great, because it also

allowed me to look behind the scenes to see how the gardens are built. I thought: 'Well, I do this all the time, so there's no reason why I can't do this.'"

However, while Bin Zaal may be the first Emirati designer to take part in Chelsea, The Beauty of Islam will not be the first UAE garden to feature at the show. Sheikh Zayed sponsored several Chelsea show gardens throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, winning five gold medals and one of the coveted Best in Show awards in 2004 with Hortus Conclusus, a contemporary garden designed by the British landscape designer Christopher Bradley-Hole. Bradley-Hole designed Sheikh Zayed's last three Chelsea gardens, all of which won gold medals, including 2003's Garden from the Desert and 2005's In the Grove, which was commissioned by Sheikh Zayed, but was only exhibited after his death.

Bradley-Hole, a five-time Chelsea gold medalist, fondly remembers the gardens he designed for Sheikh Zayed. "When you're designing a Chelsea garden in particular, I think you need to feel inspired by your client or by the sponsor," the Englishman explains. "And the overriding thing for me was Sheikh Zayed. In terms of planting, I can't think of anybody who has done more, really. In the most difficult conditions;

he regarded planting trees as the epitome of what he should be doing, and to have been able to focus on that while he was running a country was a huge inspiration."

Although he only met Sheikh Zayed briefly, Bradley-Hole says that his many visits to Abu Dhabi convinced him of the need to use the Chelsea gardens as a tool for educating the British public about Abu Dhabi and of doing this in a way that the show's audience would understand. "The previous gardens, I felt, had made it look as if there was this very rich man in the Gulf who wanted to show that he had lots of money and to do a garden at Chelsea," the designer explains. "There seemed to be no connection between what Sheikh Zayed had done and the British public, and I thought that it was very important, at the same time as designing the garden, to communicate what he had done.

"The very nice thing was that they then left me to it, to do something that was really quite abstract. There was never any feeling of having to get across a message or of preaching; it was just a feeling of joy in the gardens, and I think that came across."

In 2003, Bradley-Hole did this with Garden from the Desert, which featured a three-metre-by-three-metre cube-shaped glass pavilion and glass water channels that were inspired by the

UAE's ancient falaj systems. "The whole theme of the first garden was about irrigation and planting in the desert," remembers Bradley-Hole. "It was inspired by the oasis and date plantations I'd seen in Al Ain and the use of plants to combat desertification."

The designer's desire to showcase Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Zayed's achievements extended beyond the garden's design. "We had a man who came across from Abu Dhabi who served coffee to people at the show and we also handed out boxes of dates.

"You get quite exhausted walking around the show and so we handed out bottles of water with specially printed labels saying: 'The importance of water.' We did it for each of the gardens and we also produced a slightly different brochure about Abu Dhabi for each show."

By the time Bradley-Hole was announced as Sheikh Zayed's designer for a second year, the public had become curious about the designer's relationship with what was then perceived as a little-known desert country. "The BBC approached me to find out what was going on, so I approached Sheikh Zayed's department and they said: 'Why don't you bring the BBC out to Abu Dhabi?'" They arranged for the Air Force to fly us out into the desert in a couple of helicopters, and so

there was a chance to talk about Abu Dhabi in quite a lengthy programme. We went to Al Ain and to the desert and to Abu Dhabi city."

The film featured as part of the BBC's coverage of Chelsea in the year that Bradley-Hole's design not only won a gold medal but was also named as the Best Garden at the show. "I thought that was a big breakthrough really, because Sheikh Zayed got a lot of publicity because of that," Bradley-Hole remembers. "He was so connected with growing things and horticulture that [designing his gardens at Chelsea] seemed a natural thing to do. There are the corporate sponsors at Chelsea, but I can't think of anybody else who has had that connection with the show."

When it comes to representing the UAE at Chelsea in 2015, Bin Zaal shares Bradley-Hole's sense of responsibility and hopes that her garden will be something that not only resonates with the British public, but will also have an effect at home, especially among her fellow Emirati women.

"I'm proud that my country gives opportunities like this," Bin Zaal explains. "There's no holding women back in our culture and I hope that's it's a symbol for other Emirati women and girls to strive, work hard and to really think that they can achieve anything."

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