



Designer Manoj Malde, is the creative force behind UK based landscape company Couture Gardens. His passion and enthusiasm for colour and style have gained him projects ranging from indoor garden designs for high-end inner London restaurants to commissions for clients living around the Mediterranean. His entry design for the Chelsea Flower Show this year, is inspired by Mexican architect Luis Barragan, entitled 'Beneath a Mexican Sky', and sponsored by Inland Homes. So in our next issue we'll take you through the process of how his garden came to fruition - and of course, see how he got on.

In the meantime, I don't know about you, but we're always fascinated by the thought process that goes into a specific design. So we caught up with Manoj to ask him a few searching questions. Not all of them about gardening!

When did you first become interested in landscaping and designing?

“ I was always creative and even as a child I loved gardening. When we moved to the UK from Kenya, my brothers started a vegetable plot at the back of my parent's garden and I used to help. I continued to do the gardening in my parent's garden. From the age of 13 I knew I wanted a creative career, my interests then grew into transforming 2D design into 3D design which then led to an interest in Fashion. I worked in the fashion industry for 18 years before I ventured into landscape design. My partner Clive Gillmor had studied for RHS level 1 and 2 and set up his own garden maintenance business. All my working career I had worked for other organisations and I wanted to do something for myself. I gave up my career as creative director to go back to school and study garden design. I was able to transfer many of skills from Fashion Design into Garden Design. I guess the phrase 'from Haute Couture to Hort Couture' sums it up well. ”

Is this your first involvement with RHS shows and how did the journey start?

“ I have worked on 3 main avenue show gardens with other designers. In 2011 I worked with Diarmuid Gavin on the Irish Sky Garden, in 2012 I worked with Chris Beardshaw on the Furzy Garden and last year I helped to lead the planting team on Nick Bailey's Beauty of Mathematics Garden. Even as a student at the English Gardening School I dreamt of doing a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. I felt I was ready for the challenge and my time had come. ”

Were you totally involved or part of a team with your initial Mediterranean design for this project at Chelsea?

“ The design was totally me but as this progressed I had to find a contractor who not only had experience of doing show gardens but was willing to work with an unknown at Chelsea. I was delighted when Living Landscapes saw my design and said they really wanted to build the garden for me. The next step was to find a nursery who would work with

me. I wanted one nursery and that was Kelways Plants. I sent my initial plant list to them and had an excited Dave Root on the phone the next day saying he loved my plant choice and definitely wanted to work with me. I had my contractor and my nursery but the icing on the cake was when Inland Homes Plc agreed to sponsor my garden. ”

What was the ethos and theme for your project?

“ We live in an environment where more and more space is being taken over by concrete and buildings. Whilst this might be necessary we strongly believe that green spaces and plants are also necessary for our health and peace of mind. Green spaces are becoming more precious. They are becoming a place of refuge, of calm, of relaxation, of stillness that we all need in our lives. This is captured within the Beneath a Mexican Sky garden and is also what Barragan's outdoor spaces stood for. Our ethos is therefore to design spaces of beauty that are also beneficial to one's wellbeing.

The garden itself is inspired by the work of Luis Barragan. I therefore kept it as a contemporary Mexican courtyard garden. Many of the plants are indigenous to Mexico. These are combined with Mediterranean plants. The garden applies a new thought process, using drought tolerant plants that merge Mediterranean style with country cottage planting. ”

How many people are involved in creating your design and what's the build up from now until the start of the show?

“ At site there will be approximately 20 people for the build however in total there are hundreds if you consider the teams working on growing my plants both in the UK, Spain and Italy, the guys transporting the plants, the teams creating the steel works, the volunteers manning the garden at the show, the designer and printers of the show garden brochure, the team printing the hi-viz jackets, the marketing team, the photographer, the videographer and the team at the RHS who make the show happen.

Living Landscapes have started working on the build and are currently preparing the frame work for the walls. Outdoor Designs are constructing our steels structures that will support the large zinc micro-cement steps which will be finished by Topcret UK. Kelways Plants are bringing on my plants for the show, some of which have been grown from seed. Rupert Till is creating my sculpture for me. I'm overseeing the finer details of the garden, I'm also heavily involved in marketing, liaising with the sponsor and keeping tabs on the budget as there is always the risk of this going out of control. I've been working with the graphic designer on design of the brochure, selecting the photographer and the videographer, organising build schedules with the contractor and also creating schedules for the planting team. The sleepless nights and panic attacks are yet to come. ”

Will the weather affect your plans? Are you hoping for the traditional British weather or some warm Mediterranean sunshine?

“ The first two days of planting on the Beauty of Mathematics garden, the site was a quagmire. At one point my foot sank into the ground and I had to get someone to pull me out.

I'm therefore praying that the weather is kind to us. We have some elements of the garden that need 2 to 3 days drying time. Some of our plants are delicate and we do not want them getting blasted by heavy rain. ”

With your current business do you offer contracts for just UK or are you interested in projects abroad?

“ With my growing interest in Mediterranean gardens and landscapes this definitely is an area that I want to explore further by creating gardens for private clients either living abroad or those who have second homes overseas. ”

What's your ambition and future aims for the next 5 years?

“ The plan for the next 5 years is to grow the company, develop the design business into public spaces, hotels, spas and more private gardens in the Mediterranean and further afield. I've started doing some public speaking and this is another area that I would like to pursue along with some TV work. ”

What do you do in your spare time to relax?

“ I love to read and I'm currently reading The Bold Dry Garden: Lessons from the Ruth Bancroft Garden by Johanna Silver and Marion Brenner. Some of my favorite fiction novels are The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini, Memoirs of a Geisha by Arthur Golden and Tales of the City by Armistead Maupin. Maupin made me feel like I wish I had been living in San Fran in the 1970's. I am a PADI qualified diver and would love to do more scuba diving. I love to travel. I enjoy cooking and entertaining. ”

Tell us your perfect holiday destination and your perfect meal from starter to dessert?

“ I have always wanted to go to Bali. I'm not interested in the tourist trap places. I'd like to visit Celuk for its arts and crafts, Ubud for the swank boutique hotels nestled within the monkey forests, Bedugul in the north where the misty mountains reach the clouds and soak in the hot spring waters at Banjar. Perfect meal would also be Thai as I love the flavours. Som Tum (papaya salad) as a starter, vegetable massaman curry with thai sticky rice for main, green tea icecream for dessert. OK that has just made my mouth water. ”

Black Range Rover, Red Maserati, Blue Aston Martin or Grey Ford?

“ None of these. If I had to choose, it would be one of the classic American cars that you see in Cuba. However, what I would love is a Regal 28 Express (sports boat). ”

What are your favourite colour combinations both in your clothing choice and in the garden?

“ My favourite colour combination within planting design is pinks and oranges with hints of purple. This is something that visitors will see within Beneath a Mexican Sky garden at Chelsea. It's a rich colourful combo which reminds me of India and also of my mother's saris. The colour combos within my wardrobe vary considerably. I do love blues and purples but my favourite is my yellow biker jeans, black Belstaff boots, dark charcoal DKNY fitted shirt with a black fitted blazer. As an ex creative director in the fashion industry I love clothes. ”