GARDEN DESIGNER TIM AUSTEN ON WHY HE'S TOO BUSY FOR BLOOM [PAGE 18]

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GARDEN DESIGNER TIM AUSTEN

GARDEN COUNTY'S GARDEN EXPERT

DESPITE GREAT SUCCESS AT PREVIOUS BLOOM FESTIVALS, TIM AUSTEN IS GOING TO HAVE TO SIT OUT THIS YEAR'S EVENT. THE GARDEN DESIGNER, WHO HAS ACHIEVED NATIONAL ACCLAIM FOR HIS CREATIONS, TELLS **DAVID MEDCALF** WHY

(Left) Dee Ahearn of Barretstown and Siobhn Talbot from Glanbia with Sinead Ni Raghallaigh and Keva Murtagh exploring the magical garden designed by Tim Austen, which won the People's Choice award at Bloom 2014, after it was installed at Barretstown in July last year.

THE economy really must be looking up. While the rest of the gardening world is heading for the Phoenix Park, Tim Austen will be elsewhere during the Bloom festival this year – he is simply too busy to devote time to the showcase event in Dublin.

The Wicklow man first set up stall at Ireland's hugely popular answer to the Chelsea Flower Show back in 2008 and has been a regular since, twice winning the popular vote for the best garden and once persuading the official judges that his was the top design. The big win came in 2009, complete with a reflective pool as he explored the decorative potential of crushed blue glass.

Assembling an entry for the premier competition is no small undertaking. It consumes masses of energy, imagination, time and money. He remains grateful to this day to the backers, including Simon Pratt of Avoca Handweavers, who chipped in a few bob towards his first attempt seven years ago.

'Bloom has been good to me,' he readily admits, 'but I am on a break now.'

In the past, he was drawn back year after year almost in spite of himself. Perhaps his favourite garden design for the event was the smallest, put together at short notice on a shoestring for VSO – Voluntary Service Overseas. The 'Go Barefoot Garden' explored the realities of sub-Saharan Africa with an arid desert at one end of the tiny plot and a productive vegetable patch at the other.

But he is probably better remembered for his grander works, incorporating such eye-catching features as meandering streams, red boardwalks and elaborate mosaics. Along the way, he has clocked up three prestigious gold medals from Bloom along with a couple of silvers.

Such high level consistency has helped to make his name in a business which has grown hugely during the new millennium – but which has also become very competitive against the back drop of economic recession.

There is no college churning out garden designers. Tim Austen comes to the field with formal qualifications as a geographer. His chosen university subject provided as good a grounding as any in a field where the expertise required ranges over the spectrum from horticulture to engineering.

Probably just as important as any degree or diploma, Tim also benefitted from growing up with parents who love their gardens. Over the 35 years they lived there, Stephen and Louise Austen made their home in the Rocky Valley above Kilmacanogue a local landmark. They make a good combination, with mother tackling details such as the weeding while father loves his herbaceous plants and lawns.

One of a tribe of four brothers, the Tim remembers the boyhood joys of the two acres at Crowe Lane, though it is no longer the family HQ. His folks, both teachers, have decamped in retirement to County Kerry where they have been compiling another remarkable garden since 2004. Tim notes with amusement that his dad has borrowed the red board-walk idea from his 2011 Bloom creation to illuminate his heathery little patch of the Kingdom.

The Rocky Valley is fondly remembered. He used to cut the grass there and act as general labourer for his parents in their work of constantly improving the layout.

Outside home, there was one other influential episode in the Austen upbringing. At the age of 16, he spent one glorious summer of work experience at Fernhill House in Kilternan. He was in awe there of Missus Walker, so much so that, for him, she still has no first name.

A later placement as a student at Ken Rohan's magnificent old Palladian pad Charleville House in Enniskerry was also formative. Helen Dillon was beginning to weave her magic there as a designer, perhaps setting a seed in young Austen.

When he finished his schooling in Dublin, Tim decided 'I wanted to break free and see the world.' His youthful quest for adventure took him as far as Birmingham (he laughs) and the geography department at an English redbrick university in a large British city. There the young Irishman began to take an interest in topics which would help him in his future career, though work at first was hard to find.

'There were no jobs for geographers in the late 1990s,' he recalls of his exit from the college. To gain experience, he became involved in conservation projects, setting out as a supervisor with a bunch of long term unemployed conscripts laying hedges and tending to paths in and around picturesque Chester.

'It reinforced my desire to be in the nature side of things,' he muses.

As the UK economy picked up he found a niche as a park ranger at Bexley in London. The post came with use of a Land Rover, which was nice, but the formal lay-out of the parks allowed him no scope for creativity.

He was drawn back to education and a master's degree course at Wye horticultural college in rural Kent. The place had a more old fashioned feel than Birmingham, like an Oxford college set in deepest countryside. As well as an appealing atmosphere, it also offered a worthwhile course in landscape management and design.

By chance, Wye also brought romance, in the form of a Romanian scholarship student called Camelia, now his wife.

Their early years together were spent in England where Tim worked with a bio-engineering firm. Bio-engineering? The job entailed coming up with environment-friendly solutions to dealing with tricky sites and he proved very good at it.

Towns like Tunbridge Wells and Chesterfield (where their first child was born) were congenial but the takeover of the firm by a bigger concern prompted a change of direction.

'In 2001, I had had enough and it was time to go back to Ireland.' He and Camelia settled on Wicklow.

It was a good move, though he faced a tough commute, battling all the way across traffic torn Dublin to the offices of Murray & Associates in Clontarf. Taking up a post as a project manager with his new employers was not the most obvious career move for a future garden designer.

The company concentrated on landscapes for business parks, roads, public buildings and schools riding the Celtic Tiger construction boom. Maybe he can argue that Murray's were tackling an industrial scale tasks that he would later approach in detail as a designer.

'I learned on the job,' he muses of his time with the North Dublin outfit. He learned very successfully too. He rose to associate director level during his six years based in Clontarf before the call of the garden – and a growing aversion to commuter driving – prompted the shift into the field which has made his name.

The fledgling business was boosted by securing work on the Streamstown estate in Malahide, the very epitome of high-end tiger property development.

But the collapse was on its way and the four fountains which featured prominently in the plans for Streamstown have never been switched on to this day, symbols of the collapse of the property bubble.

Work taken on in prosperous times kept him busy until 2010 but the flow dried up and the money offered by clients dropped alarmingly. Only recently has the business, run from a flower shop on South Quay in Wicklow town, picked up again.

'This year we are up to our eyeballs in projects,' ponders Tim Austen who expects to clock up many thousands of kilometres during 2015.

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'It is as though people have been holding their breath and now they are all breathing out at the one time.'

Plans for gardens are once more in demand, whether schemes for jazzing up existing homes or visions for bringing order to new builds.

His reputation is nationwide – with only one third of his work in Wicklow or Dublin. He applies his expertise to anything which comes his way and promises to make each design unique. The smallest challenge on the stocks at the moment is a courtyard measuring six metres square while the largest is a four acre spread where his imagination may run riot.

While most of his clients are private householders, examples of the Austen genius may be admired in public places. Maggie Murphy at the psychiatric hospital in Newcastle persuaded him to turn a lawn into sensory garden, for instance. Stray shots at the Dun Laoghaire golf course in Enniskerry may rattle off rocks installed by the man from the Rocky Valley. And the Woodenbridge World War One memorial is one of his too.

One project that has been put on the long finger is the family's own garden in Wicklow but it will have to wait.

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