

Praise in spades

Even the Queen digs this garden, writes Henrietta Cook

Rolf Harris, Jamie Oliver and Ringo Starr were just a handful of the celebrities who stopped to marvel at David Pontifex's latest creation.

The Sandringham resident and director of Cheltenham-based boutique builder Atkinson Pontifex recently returned from London, where he spent three weeks as part of the team building the Trailfinders Australian Garden. The garden took out a gold medal at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show.

Presented by Fleming's Nurseries and designed by Scott Wynd, the garden paid tribute to the Australian lifestyle with a swimming pool, a roofed pavilion, wet bar, sunken lounge and, of course, a barbecue.

"It was very much a lifestyle garden, everyone's response was very positive. Having a pool and a spa was an attractive idea, because they don't have swimming pools in the UK," Pontifex says. The garden was heavily planted with birds of paradise plants that were flown in from Rome.

"All the plant material has to be sourced

from Europe, otherwise it wouldn't pass quarantine," he says.

The Queen spent several minutes chatting to the team about how she missed seeing the Australian garden entries last year as a result of the crippling effects of the Victorian bushfires. A fire at Fleming's nursery in Taggerty prevented the team from competing; the company's tree stocks were burnt to the ground and the team was involved in the recovery effort.

The Atkinson Pontifex director says the team was thrilled to win the coveted award but was optimistic the whole way along. "You don't want to start jumping up and down and say you're going to win, but winning was absolutely huge."

Constructing the entry was a mammoth task that involved unpacking shipping crates full of building materials and tools and working 14-hour days for a week.

Pontifex says Melburnians have no idea just how important the English horticultural event is. "It's really the highlight of their social



Dean Atkinson and David Pontifex in front of their HIA Home of the Year and Custom Home of the Year award-winning house

calendar and starts their spring season; all tickets are sold a week before the show. The crowds around the garden were four or five deep and on the first day of opening there must have been 300 people constantly taking photos of the Australian garden."

While Pontifex was in London representing the country, his business partner and childhood friend Dean Atkinson was receiving a prestigious HIA Home of the Year award in Brisbane. A house the duo built in Beaumaris

took out Home of the Year and Custom Home of the Year at the Housing Industry Association awards. It took them two years to build the two-storey brick-veneer Beaumaris house which came complete with a 20-metre pool and a basement home theatre.

"We are really passionate about doing quality residential construction; we are not budget builders by any means." ■

For more information, visit atkinsonpontifex.com.au