



bright white

Award-winning garden designer, Xanthe White's parents must have had an inkling they had produced a child who would steal headlines. They mulled for six months over choosing a name for their baby girl 30 years ago and finally, inspired by the colour of her fair hair, they settled on the Greek name meaning "blonde".

Xanthe didn't remain blonde, but her name has definitely captured celebrity status in New Zealand – especially after her heady success at that Holy Grail of gardening, the Chelsea Flower Show.

Comments from mega trendy mags, which credit Xanthe for making gardening "cool" or talk of her stellar career in design circles, haven't altered this totally genuine

young woman. Even in the occasionally bitchy business of garden design other plant people agree she's "just downright nice" and "an awesome ambassador for New Zealand at Chelsea".

Xanthe studied landscape design at Auckland's UNITEC before establishing her own company, winning a silver medal with her Ellerslie Flower Show debut in 2003. She



also picked up the People's Choice Award and the Judges' Supreme Award for Lighting Excellence there the following year and in 2005 was commissioned to design the show's piece de resistance, a 1200sqm marquee tracing the development of this country's gardening style.

The designer remains in awe of the whole Chelsea Flower Show experience, which saw her take a Silver Gilt Medal in May 2005. She is also grateful for the television experience she had in New Zealand, appearing on *Groundforce* presenting *The Ultimate Garden* in 2004, for showing her how to handle the press coverage overseas.

"From a career point of view, Chelsea was like getting a degree from the top varsity in the world. It was pretty special working alongside absolute masters from the top of the game. From a personal point of view, I felt like a different person coming out of it," Xanthe says. "It was a challenge managing a large team, with many of them older than me, and so many different creative issues to consider. I became like a director while trying to tune into the central vision and also doing all the media stuff."

The BBC made four programmes on Xanthe's West Coast-inspired garden, entered under Tourism New Zealand's "100% Pure" marketing banner, and she handled a whole raft of television interviews and appearances while in the UK. It was media work on a massive international scale she hadn't experienced before.

"I felt fortunate that I'd had low-profile media experience in New Zealand with a nice balance between reality and work.

The global exposure could have been a huge shock, but I had my feet on the ground throughout the whole thing."

She totally enjoyed recreating the Chelsea garden – complete with black sand, sculpture and glass features depicting water – for the Ellerslie Flower Show, and particularly for New Zealanders to enjoy.

"Here there is so much more physical space and a wonderful connection between my design and the natural landscape, including the background of majestic totaras, and other native trees and plants."

Small in stature and managing to look stylish even in her gardening gear, Xanthe exudes effervescent enthusiasm, flinging her hands around as she talks.

"I'm like my Dad in that," she grins.

Her parents, David and Judith, and her older brother, Clem, are obviously hugely important in her busy world, while their amalgam of creative skills has been character and career-shaping. Judith is a well-known writer; she's published many short stories and is working on her second full-length novel. David is a computer software design specialist, who worked on the Wanganui Computer in its early days and has designed a special learning programme for the Auckland University. Clem also works in computers and as a musician.

"My parents have widened my mind to all sorts of possibilities and how I view the world. I was born in Wellington and lived in the States for two years, when



Xanthe White.

Dad was working in Seattle, before we all travelled over-land back to New Zealand. At seven, I walked into the Himalayas and trekked through India.”

After the hype of Chelsea, when Xanthe went off to “drift around” with her partner in the South of France, Morocco and other exotic destinations, it was her parents who travelled with the couple.

Xanthe does put in the long hours, but she is not taking all the credit for her success.

“I have worked for six years with Fiona Henderson as my project manager, administrator and researcher. She is a wonderful support and highly skilled plant person, with a great understanding of horticulture. For example, if I need to find a red plant to grow up a particular wall, Fiona will do the background research for me.”

Home for the garden designer and her partner is currently a little apartment on the second floor of a big old building in Mt Eden.

“If I had my own garden, it would all be dead after all the travelling I’ve been doing, or I’d have a huge maintenance bill. I’m always planning the house and garden I will eventually build, though.”

Colour has always been important to Xanthe, ruling as a major factor in her design work.

“I like breaking the rules in colour themes to connect plants. I am completely confident with the use of colour and prefer

The BBC made four programmes on Xanthe’s West Coast-inspired garden, entered under Tourism New Zealand’s “100% Pure” marketing banner.

to go with either greys and blacks, or deep, vibrant colours – it’s dangerous if you get stuck in the middle.”

She adores vibrant colours in plants such as echiums, poppies, some of the salvias and rudbeckias, and considers artichokes – which she loves to eat, too, with a simple hollandaise sauce – as “consistently under-rated and under-used”.

For the Chelsea garden, which was inspired by the wild west coast of Auckland, Xanthe used Resene All Black on the rocks depicting the Waitakere Ranges. Resene Red Berry and Resene Cod Grey are other favourites. In the maze created in the marquee at Ellerslie last year, all the sizzling hot ‘80s colours used in the cube were Resene as well.

“I always use Resene colours in my gardens. I prefer to use quality New Zealand products, and I know with Resene I can depend on the quality of the materials, as well as the right technical advice delivered on time,” she explains. “I live in the moment. The project I’m working on at the time will always be the one I’m most interested in. I’m not a planner, but think life is like a ride and enjoy seeing where it takes me.” **H**

- Resene All Black
- Resene Cod Grey
- Resene Red Berry
- Resene Zomp