

INTERVIEW

Shaping the beauty of nature

This week we caught up with long-standing Algarve resident and successful landscape architect Richard Westcott to find out why he feels at one with nature and what made him leave behind a promising career in the Middle East to follow his heart and set up his own company in the Algarve.

By ROGER GREEN

Landscape gardening for Richard Westcott is more than just a profession. It's an art form and a passion which has inspired him since his childhood days and throughout his entire working life.

Richard, who established his company *Jardim Vista* in the Algarve 23 years ago, said: "I love what I do and I am passionate about gardens as an art form. It is a wonderful form of art because a garden is a picture that is three dimensional and a picture that changes through the seasons and through a lifetime.

"It has smell, sound, such as the rustle of leaves and the tinkle of water, and is a sensory experience - for example you feel the grass under your bare feet. There are few art forms to match it and I feel very lucky to be able to work in this field to create something for people that makes them happy.

"The best part of my job is to put the final touch to a garden and then see the client's faces as they look at it for the first time. It's a thrill I never get tired of and I hope this passion permeates throughout the *Jardim Vista* company."

Richard, aged 51, studied horticulture and landscape design at Reading University in the UK and soon after graduating landed a job in Saudi Arabia.

"It was interesting getting to know the flora of the region. It was very interesting both in the cultural and professional sense. I learned a lot about hot weather plants and a lot about Muslim culture."

He then moved to Dubai working for a company doing landscape design for the Maktoum family, rulers of Dubai.

There, Richard did the



plant design for the first Emirates Golf Course, as well as work on the family's palaces and developments.

He had visited Portugal on a family holiday and in 1990 he decided to leave the Middle East and set up his own company - an ambition he had been nursing for some time.

"One voice inside me told me to stay in the Middle East but my heart told me to come to Portugal," he said.

"It wasn't for the sunshine, the beaches and the cuisine, although these have been a bonus; it was a good place to launch my own company - the move was career motivated. I wanted to be back in Europe in a place where there could be an emerging market and to continue to do hot weather landscaping."

"I had 400 people working for me in Dubai and in Portugal I had to go back to zero."

The beginning ...

He started from scratch and soon met Michael Garveigh with whom Richard had a partnership for 15-years, purchasing his shareholding in 2005.

The first job was a far cry from the luxuries of Dubai.

It was a hilltop garden near Bensafrim for an Englishman. "I had an Opel Corsa with a few *enxadas* (hoes) thrown in the boot and three Portuguese workers crammed into the car. We had to drive 5 kilometres up a dirt track to the property," he said.

About two years after arriving in Portugal, two major events influenced Richard's life. His mother, to whom he had been very close, sadly died and the following summer he met and fell in love with his Spanish wife Diana, an interior designer. They were married in church in Praia da Luz where they now live. The couple have four children, Sofia, Daniel, Sara and Siena.

"My family and my business have occupied all my time for the past 23 years," he said.

Richard met HRH Prince Charles two years ago at a Chamber Event in Lisbon. "Prince Charles seemed to know about Jardim Vista and

his principal question to me was: 'Are you getting paid by the developers?'

"My reply was not completely in the affirmative," smiled Richard.

Jardim Vista currently employs 140 workers, including a number of landscape architects, compared to 325 in 2008, and Richard is emphatic in his criticism of the lack of government support for the small and medium businesses, despite a recent announcement of an aid programme.

"There has been a lot of rhetoric but until now there has been almost nothing done."

Over the years, the company has been chosen to carry out major projects in Portugal and abroad and is considered to be the leading landscape gardening company on the Iberian Peninsula.

Their extensive portfolio includes the Oceanarium at World Expo 98, the Macau Pavilion where they recreated a park after the Lu Lim Leoc Park in Macau, the Quinta da Fonte business park in Lisbon, the Santa Eulália Hotel resort in the Algarve and more recently the Conrad Hotel in Quinta do Lago, designed by Richard himself.

An unusual project was the refurbishment of the monastic gardens of the Convento do Espinheiro - now a luxury hotel in Évora.

Owners of many luxury villas in the Golden Triangle area of the Algarve have also been clients of *Jardim Vista*, including well-known UK soccer players Alan Shearer, Robbie Fowler and Scott Parker, as well as the English radio celebrity Chris Evans.

For the past six years, *Jardim Vista* has also produced a popular weekly TV show about landscape gardening on the SIC channel, entitled *Querido Mudei A Casa*.

"We have developed a fantastic portfolio of work over the past 23 years and because of the difficulties that exist in the eurozone we are now taking our knowledge, expertise and infrastructures and starting to operate overseas including in the UK and Africa," said Richard.