



Kamelia bin Zaal and *The Beauty of Islam*, dedicated to Sheikh Zayed, at the Chelsea Flower Show in London. Stephen Lock for The National

Chelsea show's first Emirati already has her gold medal

Landscape gardener ecstatic to be at prestigious UK event

Ben Flanagan

LONDON // The prestigious Chelsea Flower Show awards are handed out today – but Emirati exhibitor Kamelia bin Zaal already feels like a winner.

Ms bin Zaal is the first UAE national designer to display at the Royal Horticultural Society's annual show, a highlight of the British social season.

Her garden came under the

scrutiny of the judges yesterday and she hopes to clinch a gold medal for *The Beauty of Islam*.

But just being there is enough for the Dubai gardener.

"It would be great but I've already got my award because I'm here," Ms bin Zaal said. "This is the epitome of my life's ambition, to be at Chelsea. As a garden designer, this is the Oscars."

Even the British drizzle did not dampen her spirits as she competes against 14 others for the main prize.

"I'm just absolutely over the moon, I'm running on excitement. The garden has just come out so wonderfully," she said.

Her garden reflects Islamic and

Arab culture and includes inspiration from the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi.

It is dedicated to Sheikh Zayed, the founding President, a passionate garden enthusiast.

It features references to the Spice Route, with species including cardamom, fig, citrus and olive. Some of the plants used, including a bismarkia silver palm, have never been displayed at Chelsea before, Ms bin Zaal said.

The key focus of the garden is a waterwall, featuring a verse from the Quran that reads: "The gates of the Garden of Eden will open up to them."

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Tribute to Zayed at gardening 'Oscars'

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Sheikh Zayed exhibited many of his own gardens at Chelsea, including the 2003 gold medal winner Garden from the Desert, designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole.

"Hopefully I'm carrying on his legacy," said Ms bin Zaal, who is also the first female Arab landscape designer to participate at Chelsea.

Her garden includes a poem honouring Sheikh Zayed called



The plants show the diversity of countries that Islam touched

Kamelia bin Zaal Emirati exhibitor

Flock of Meanings, which was written by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, and is carved into marble running around the side wall.

Ms bin Zaal said she wanted to convey a positive message about the "serenity and peacefulness" of Islam through the design of her garden, and to make reference to the broad geographic area touched by the religion.

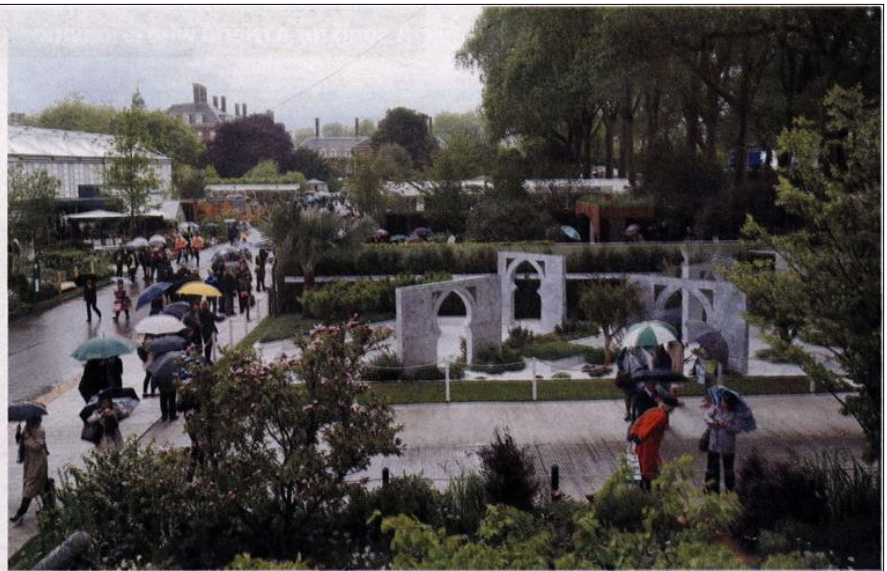
"The plants, for example, show the diversity of countries that Islam touched, and also through Arab trade through the Spice Route," she said.

Ms bin Zaal is the eldest daughter of property developer Zaal Mohammed Zaal, who is behind the luxury Dubai housing complex Al Barari, and who sponsored the Chelsea Flower Show appearance.

She is also creative director at Al Barari, known for its lush grounds and multimillion-dirham properties.

Her team arrived at Chelsea last month for the challenging work of preparing the garden, and Ms bin Zaal said she had many sleepless nights in the run-up to the show.

"We've been lucky. One of my



The 'Beauty of Islam' garden at the Chelsea Flower Show, London, which is dedicated to the late Sheikh Zayed. Stephen Lock for the National

trees didn't make it for the show, so we had to send it back to be loved and cared for. But it hasn't changed my garden," she said.

The species used - also including citrus trees, pomegranate and camomile - were carefully sourced by Ms bin Zaal's team, who travelled as far afield as the Netherlands and Spain in the search of the perfect flora.

The pre-judging took place on Sunday and the formal judging yesterday. Entrants are not allowed in the garden during this time, so Ms bin Zaal went for a cup of tea "to warm up".

"I was more nervous for the pre-judging, because you have to talk to them for two minutes about things that may have

changed from your brief," she said.

Although she was not deterred by the rain, Ms bin Zaal said she was hoping for sunshine later in the week at the Chelsea Flower Show, which opens to the public today and runs until Saturday.

"The rain is not great for my garden, because there's a lot of play on light and shade in the garden," she said.

But she is only too aware of the capricious British weather, having studied landscape gardening at the Inchbald School of Design in London.

"It's England," she said. "So who knows?"

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Gardeners prepare for the judging of Kamelia bin Zaal's the 'Beauty of Islam' garden at the Chelsea Flower Show. Tim Ireland / AP Photo