



martin semken

Semken Landscaping



MIFGS 2008 Best in Show Garden – Sei Sei Tei

Martin Semken started his landscape construction and maintenance business in 1987 and within one week, hired his first apprentice. Twenty-three years on Semken Landscaping is now one of the largest landscaping businesses in Victoria and employs 69 people. It's not a company that features in the landscape awards, nor do you necessarily associate the company with the big profile landscapes featured in glossy magazines, but one of the constants about Semken is the enduring passion and commitment to the Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show and to the ongoing development of people within this industry. Many lessons can be learnt from Martin's attitude towards running a landscape business and every decision that he has made is rooted in sound business practice.

When Martin started his business, he says his prime motivation was to earn enough to eat. Now his motivation is to provide enough work for his employees to eat. His philosophy is that no job is too small because out of every job comes opportunity, if you know how to recognise it. But it also keeps a variety of work coming in and he sees this as a great motivator and opportunity for learning for his staff and the small jobs plug the gaps between larger jobs of which there are many. Martin loves the creative process that landscape construction provides yet has no desire to branch into design, stating that by working with a variety of landscape designers there are always new projects and ideas to look forward to.

Another aspect to Martin is his love of and skill with people. He has an innate sense of people's strengths and weaknesses including his own and he manages the business according to this. It is no coincidence that many of his employees have remained with him for many years and Martin is the first to point out that it's not because of the pay rates that make staff stay.

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He is a strong believer that you should do what you love, follow it and make the investment in it and he rewards his staff by believing in them, mentoring them and encouraging their ideas. His own home garden is turned over to each new junior team leader to manage and put their ideas in as a learning exercise in managing clients and leading a team. He insists on meeting the parents of every new apprentice so that if they have any concerns or questions the link has been made and a sense of interest and investment in the young person's career is established, a sense of extended family is made. And this culture permeates the company.

MIFGS is another passion. Where others have come and gone, Semken Landscaping has remained a constant. Over fifteen years, Semken have constructed fifty-five show gardens including three 'Best in Shows' yet Martin says the best is still ahead. He loves the camaraderie of the show, and again the opportunities that participation brings particularly for his staff. Every year Semken Landscaping are involved in at least two show gardens that always attract medals but also are very much about business.

The 2008 Best in Show Garden Sei Sei Tei, constructed by Semken is a case in point. The garden was pre-sold and therefore, theoretically, 'on loan' during MIFGS. This not only minimised costs but also provided a marketing photo opportunity for Semken for use on their website, increasing the brand internationally. And of course, there was one happy client who could share the success of his garden with his friends and potential Semken clients. Martin says it's not rocket science and he has justifiably reaped the rewards of being smart about MIFGS. No opportunity wasted.

And again it's about the people. Many corporate contacts and work has been won from being at the show and taking the time. And time is what he gives; to his staff building at the show, to other participants, to the security staff and forklift drivers, to me and to anyone else who wants to have a chat about something he's so positive and passionate about.

Sadly this MIFGS marked the passing of Martin's business partner Mark Bence who died while the show was on. Like Martin, Mark loved MIFGS and despite failing health, managed to visit the Semken team days before he passed away to great joy and laughter. The memory of this will stay with them forever. To honour Mark's memory, a new MIFGS construction award was introduced this year in his name and will be awarded each year to the most well constructed show garden. Jason Hodges was this year's inaugural winner.

Martin and Mark went into business together in 1988 at the cost of a slab of beer and a trailer. With Mark's passing, Semken Landscaping will go on with some adjustments, however it has always been Martin's way to 'grow your own' and no doubt he will find someone within the company to develop the skills that Mark had brought. One thing that has changed though is Martin's desire to keep working. When I asked him about his exit strategy from the industry he said that this had now changed in light of Mark's illness and he now plans to just keep working – he loves it, he loves working with young people, it keeps him young and he's still got the best landscaping project ahead of him.

Julie Edmonds