

STORY **DAVID MEAGHER**

Like the gardens he creates, the career of top landscape designer William Dangar's has flourished, as he reaps what he sowed 30 years ago with 'a little lawnmowing business'

ROOT & BRANCH



MICHAEL WEE



Above: **Garden of warehouse apartment, Surry Hills**
 Left: **Courtyard of a house in Bellevue Hill**
 Opposite page, top: **William Dangar**
 Bottom: **Framed foliage at a house in Vaucluse**
 Opening spread: **The award-winning Bismarck House, Bondi**

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According to William Dangar, one of Australia's leading landscape designers, the best clients are those who are truly passionate gardeners and are up for a horticultural adventure. The next best, he says, are the ones who just want the job done and leave him and his team to their own devices. "They want the outcome, but they don't really care about the process. They just want it to look beautiful," he says. Then there are the tricky clients. "They're the ones who think they know everything about horticulture but don't really know too much at all, and they can be quite challenging." Dangar says he hasn't had too many trying clients in his career. "I've been lucky," he admits.

Luck, or meeting the right people and being in the right place at the right time, has played a big part in Dangar's career. He grew up on a grazing property in Armidale in northern New South Wales that his family, descendants of the surveyor and pastoralist Henry Dangar, had been on since the early 1880s. But seeking some adventure as a young man, he signed up for a stint working as a stockman on the Northern Territory's 12,000sq km Brunette Downs cattle station. On a trip back home, he met his future wife, Julia, at a party. She told him that if he wanted the relationship to continue he would need to move to Sydney as she had no plans to become a country girl. And she assured him that she would find him a job if he did. The job she got him was as a labourer for a landscape company.

That was in 1991. The country was in a deep economic recession and Dangar's work with his new employer quickly started drying up. He could see the writing on the wall, so with little more than a secondhand Mazda ute and a couple of shovels and rakes, he decided to set up his own lawnmowing business.

"I just canvassed my girlfriend's mother's friends," says Dangar of his start in business. As fate would have it, his girlfriend's mother's friends all lived in the reasonably recession-proof eastern suburbs of Sydney, where people like their gardens to look good but rarely get dirt under their nails. Starting out modestly but with a base of well-heeled clients stood Dangar in good stead – word of mouth, after all, being one of the best marketing tools.

And in this particular milieu, clients not only have an appreciation for gardens and plants, they also have the land to put them on and the resources to pay for them. Which is convenient, because today's landowners lack the patience to wait for a garden to mature naturally. Whereas once a planned garden might take a century to mature to its full potential, today's wealthy want their gardens to look established from day one.

"We are very fortunate to have some good budgets for what we do, so we're being employed to propose transplanted mature trees on all our jobs," says Dangar. "You get that instant effect from the scale of those trees and then all the other stuff knits together over a three-to-five-year period. But some of the best landscapes we've created haven't been instant landscapes, they've been ones that have developed over time, and I find those ones really satisfying, because I might not get back to every project every year and it's lovely to be able to remember something from the drawing board and see that it has exceeded our expectation of what it should look like."

One of Dangar's favourite parts of each day is when his email inbox starts to fill with photographs of some of the gardens he and his team have created over the years. One of his many enterprises, Cutting Hedge, is a landscape maintenance business that was established to service his clients after the initial build and planting was completed. About 90 per cent of his gardens are not just designed and built by Dangar and his team, but their ongoing care and maintenance is also done by them. At the end of every service, the team send photos through to their clients of the work they've completed, and Dangar is copied in. "It's just very satisfying seeing all of those gardens we've created looking their best," he says. It's another great marketing tool – it means that no garden that carries his name as the creator is ever in a state of decline.

Today, Dangar has interests in a range of landscape and building companies that employ about 140 people. The "little lawnmowing business" he started 30 years ago has also evolved into a fully-fledged partnership, with Naomi Barin and Tom Smith becoming directors and the company renamed as Dangar Barin Smith in 2018. As well as the landscape design business, Dangar has an involvement and shareholding in Robert Plumb Garden, a landscape construction company; Robert Plumb Build, a building firm that does jobs up to \$10m; Robert Plumb Fix, for smaller building works; and Cranbrook Workshop, a joinery business. Then there's Robert Plumb Store, a retail business that sells the company's own outdoor products, furniture and accessories as well as a selection of international brands.





Despite having an interest in many businesses, Dangar is a true collaborator, and in his interview with WISH he continually referred to people in his field he admires and others who have helped him along the way. First among them is his wife Julia, who convinced him to make that move to Sydney and got him started in gardening. Another is the landscape designer Marcia Hosking, whom he worked with for four years, implementing her designs. “She did all the creative work and I did all the physical work,” says Dangar. Then there’s Eric Matthews, a former editor of *Belle Magazine*, who Dangar says inspired the creative side of his work and who gave him the self-belief that he could go out on his own. And William Clifton, an apprentice carpenter he met on a job and with whom he founded the Robert Plumb line of businesses.

All the associated businesses, Dangar says, have been started out of necessity and/or a way of keeping all aspects of the design and construction of gardens and houses in the same like-minded family as the right business partners came along. “We’ve just organically morphed into a few different things over the past three decades,” he says. The process has given him multiple income streams, and despite its size it has freed him to concentrate on his first love: garden design and consultancy. And it’s the one part of his work, he says, he will never let go.

“It’s a very rare day when I don’t enjoy my job,” he says. “The hardest part of my business is telling people that unfortunately I can’t work for them; we just can’t fit everyone in. The consultancy work is fixed, and as soon as we scale up my involvement in the projects diminishes, and I want to be involved in the design of all our projects to varying degrees. Nothing leaves our office without me approving it, and I don’t mean that in a controlling way. It’s just that I want our clients to know that although I might not be intimately involved in every aspect of their project, I have overseen it and approved it.”

The company structure has also given Dangar the means to indulge his other passion: architecture. “Julia and I love renovating and having our own building company has connected us into a wonderful network of creatives,” he says. “Some of the houses we live in, some we Airbnb and some we sell.” One house the Dangars decided to hold on to – but not live in – is the multi award-winning Bismarck House in Bondi, which is available for short-term holiday rentals. The house was designed by Andrew Burgess Architects and is one half of a pair of semis in a fairly unloved part of Bondi. A laneway runs alongside, and the genius of Burgess and Dangar’s collaboration is that, although the house is on a small and narrow block, they have created a true urban oasis that blurs the line between indoor and outdoor space. “We always look to buy properties that are on the corner because we want to showcase what we do,” says Dangar.

“I’ve been friends with Andrew for many years. His parents were clients of mine, and I just rang him up and I said I want you to do this project for Julia and I but there is one caveat,” recalls Dangar. “It can’t be like anything you’ve done before.” Dangar says he and Julia are very attached to the house and will hold on to it, and that the experience of collaborating with so many of his favourite creatives – stylist David Harrison and his wife, author and design expert Karen McCartney, as well as Burgess – was so rewarding that he is looking for similar projects to sink his teeth into.

Together with Clifton, Dangar owns a parcel of land in Oberon in the central tablelands of NSW. It was once a pine forest, and the pair are currently in the early stages of a conservation plan for the site. “What shape and form our vision for Oberon takes we’re not quite sure at this stage,” says Dangar. “We would like to build a series of interesting tiny architect-designed houses for ecotourism. That’s the plan, but it’s very early days. Basically, we’re not doing anything with it now because we don’t have the money, but we will save up for that. It’s a 10-year project and I think that will probably see me out.”

When it comes to creating a new home from the ground up, a client today engages the services not only of an architect but also often an interior designer and a landscape designer as well, to ensure the three elements combine into a whole greater than its parts. Dangar, however, is not just interested in working with some of Australia’s leading architects for the sake of it.

“I love architecture, but I’m more interested in how it interfaces with the landscape,” he says. “It doesn’t matter so much the size of the budget or the project, all that matters is the client’s willingness to do something interesting, and the relationship between the built form and the landscape needs to be balanced from the beginning. So many people are looking to maximise the floorspace ratio of the built form to the detriment of the landscape, and on very few of our projects have people asked to make the house smaller because they want a bigger garden.”



Clockwise from top left: Hunter Valley garden; house in Bellevue Hill; two views of landscaping for a Mallymook property on the NSW South Coast; interior of Bismarck House, Bondi; Barangaroo House; pool and garden in Vaucluse

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