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Emirati's prize-winning display turns Prince Charles' head at Chelsea

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LONDON // The first Emirati designer to exhibit at the prestigious Chelsea Flower Show on Tuesday picked up a silver-gilt medal for a garden inspired by Islamic culture and dedicated to Sheikh Zayed, the UAE's founding President.

Kamelia bin Zaal, the first UAE national designer at the Royal Horticultural Society's annual show, was awarded for her display, The Beauty of Islam.

Britain's Prince Charles and his wife Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, were among the royal figures and celebrities to visit Ms bin Zaal's garden at Chelsea.

Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, showed an interest, partly because one of the gardens at his family home, Highgrove House in Gloucestershire, draws on Middle Eastern influences, Ms bin Zaal said.

"He was very appreciative, because he has his own Islamic garden at Highgrove," she said.

Prince Charles' youngest brother, Prince Edward, the Earl of Wessex, and his wife Sophie, also visited the garden, along with veteran TV presenters Esther Rantzen and Angela Rippon.

Although missing out on the coveted gold medals and the 'best show garden' award — the top prize at the show — the Dubai-based Ms bin Zaal said she was thrilled at clinching the silver-gilt.

"To receive a silver-gilt is incredible. Honestly, I can't really explain it," she told The National on Tuesday. "I wasn't really expecting a medal as a first-timer," she said.

The sun was shining at the Chelsea Flower Show on Tuesday, the first day it opens to the public.

It had rained on Monday, when the main round of judging took place, and Ms bin Zaal displayed the garden to media, royalty and celebrities.

Ms bin Zaal's garden — which was also inspired by the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi — features references to the Spice Route, with species including cardamom, fig, citrus and olive.

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.

Ms bin Zaal wanted her garden to convey a positive image of Islam — something she said the public has proved receptive to.

"Everyone is just describing it as serene and peaceful," she said. "I've had a lot of [people saying] 'You should have won gold'."

There were 15 entrants in the 'show garden' category at Chelsea, a staple of the British social calendar.

The Laurent-Perrier Chatsworth Garden, designed by Dan Pearson, was on Tuesday named the best show garden.

Gold medallists included 'A Perfumer's Garden in Grasse by L'Occitane', 'The Brewin Dolphin Garden', and 'The Laurent-Perrier Chatsworth Garden'.

'The Morgan Stanley Healthy Cities Garden', designed by Chris Beardshaw, was another gold medal winner. After the show, the garden will be moved to form the centrepiece of a community project in East London.

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