

DECORITA



Lorne Hancock, left, and James Dale check out the merch at Fresh Home & Garden. "We know we are a luxury item," Hancock says. "But you need a great garden to have a great life." COLIN MCCONNELL / TORONTO STAR

Stylish patter amid the plantings

Cheeky hosts of *Dirty Business* TV show have something to say on all aspects of gardening

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How does your garden grow?

With low-lying perennials, living room furniture and four landscapers all in a row: James Dale, Joel Loblaw, Kennedy McRae and Lorne Hancock, partners in the landscape architecture firm Earth Inc.

They are also hosts of the new outdoor landscaping and design show *Dirty Business*, debuting Tuesday on HGTV.

We meet up with Dale and Hancock at their regular hang, Fresh Home & Garden, at 16 Eastern Ave., purveyors of everything from outdoor furniture to beach towels and patio lanterns.

"Our show follows one project," Hancock says, "from the initial meeting with Mr. and Mrs. Smith to the reveal."

"We call the series *Dirty Business* because we get dirt under our fingers," explains Dale. "The show piggybacks on our business."

"Yes," Hancock says, "we are naughty but not dirty."

Dale, who was born in England, is a project manager at Earth Inc.

Both his grandfathers were architects, so it is in his DNA. He has a history degree from the University of Western Ontario and graduated from the landscape architecture program at Ryerson University, where he hooked up with Loblaw and McRae. They set up the company 10 years ago.

Vancouverite Hancock is also a grad from Ryerson in the same program. He joined the firm in 2000 as senior designer. "I do 100-plus designs a year," he says.

"We get everything from patios to urban sprawls," Dale says. "We just came back from the Chelsea Garden Show."

"We go to Quebec, France and Holland for inspiration," says Hancock.

Italy, not so much. "Italian gardens are more Renaissance and formal," he says. "In Holland and England, they don't have as much (backyard) space and their lifestyle is more similar to ours."

"When I grew up, we just had a picnic table in our garden," says Dale.

"We didn't have chairs like this," allows Hancock, indicating one stickered at \$1,000.

They aren't giving the stuff away at Fresh, where decorative wooden animal heads from Denmark are \$500. A double chaise longue is reduced from \$2,500 to \$1,995 and garden furniture groupings can escalate to \$10,000.

"That's more than my first house," cracks Hancock.

"We like pretty," explains Dale. "We use Fresh for all our clients."

"This is one-stop shopping," Hancock says. "Fresh has the latest trends in gardening but you have to have the bucks. It's all quality stuff."

Among the trends: "Brown is the new black," Hancock says. "In the '70s, I had a brown wall in the bedroom. Now I have a brown wall in the living room."

"The garden can show off around brown," offers Dale. "Brown mixes so well with greenery. You pick up on flowers, shrubbery and twiggery. And everything is low and anchored because there is a lot of condo style."

"The outdoor living room is popular," Hancock says. "It's the biggest room in the house with a comfy couch outside."

The downside is the weather. You have to haul the couch inside when it rains.

"You even have to bring cushions from the lawn furniture in. Birds could also crap on it," says Dale.

And wicker is so Fendi baguette.

"Wicker is going by the wayside," Dale says. "You notice a lot of wicker in the garbage when you drive by and you think, 'What a find.'"

"Rattan goes rotten," Hancock adds.

The trend is outdoor furniture in woven synthetic Hularo, or IPE, a

type of hardwood. Both are weather resistant. "We're told that IPE is farmed," says Dale. "It's green and renewable. Some people care that it's green."

But most don't.

"We tell our clients there are so many indigenous stones like limestone and flagstone here," he says. "You can get cheaper stone from India but think of the carbon footprint and child labour. There are moral issues."

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LORNE HANCOCK

"But we are here for happy stories," says Hancock.

They are big fans of composting. "Everybody should have a composter, adding all the food scraps," says Dale. "Composting is huge to maintain a beautiful garden but usually composters are ugly."

There are no \$10,000 sections in their personal landscaping. "We can't afford what we do," quips Hancock.

"My front yard is simple, influenced by Dutch modernism," says Dale. "My garden is New England meets Holland. The Dutch use yew hedges and like monochromatic."

"I'm a collector," says Hancock.

"I'm all over the place." Think Toronto meets rainforest.

Another trend Dale took from the Dutch is how they hang bicycles in the entryways to their homes, making the bicycle part of the decor.

The *Dirty Business* men are not enamoured of potted plants.

"We do bold plantings of things," says Hancock. "Gone are annuals."

"We do massing of plants," Dale explains. "We'll do 38 day lilies; 24 of something else. There are fewer varieties but more of them."

"Less is more," says Hancock.

"We take plants and create rooms," says Dale. "We design gardens for non-gardeners."

"People are cocooning, entertaining more at home and showing off their homes," says Hancock.

Their client base is mostly entrepreneurs. "We get a lot of banking people, lawyers — male and female," says Dale. "It's mainly word-of-mouth."

Often, people will have built their dream homes with no money left over for their dream gardens. "They've spent all their money on appliances," says Hancock.

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Rita Zekas' DecoRita column appears Saturday in Weekend Living. Email rzekas@thestar.ca.

