

# The Clare Champion

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## Competition result is blooming great for Mary in Canada

Carol Byrne



Selected as the pick of the bunch to represent Ireland at the Canada Blooms flower-arranging show, Feakle woman Mary McKee returned from the international competition recently with a bronze ribbon award.

Mary has been a member of the Ennis Flower and Garden Club for the past 18 years and, having competed in numerous competitions, she was selected by the Association of Irish Floral Artists as the single Irish entrant for the Canada Blooms Show last month.

It was Mary's first competition of this size and her first trip to Canada but it proved to be a huge success.

"It was an amazing experience. How I got involved in flower arranging was through the Ennis Flower and Garden Club. I have been with them for the past 18 years and I entered competitions with them. I initially got involved by doing an advanced course in flower arranging," she said.

"I have entered competitions at national level and I went for flower arranger of year last year and came runner-up. This year, the Association of Irish Floral Artists actually asked me would I go forward for the Canada Blooms competition. There's only one person sent from each country and it was an honour to be asked."

There were 10 other competitors from across the world including entrants from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, France, Belgium and England. Each entrant was given a theme and Mary's theme was contemporary dance.

With dimensions of 120cm in width and an unlimited height restriction, Mary created an amazing life-size six-foot high floral depiction of a lady dancing.

"When we got the theme of contemporary dance from Canada Blooms I researched it for the two months and sourced my materials. I then had to get a phytosanitary certificate, which allows you to bring in certain plant and flower items into Canada. These are inspected before you are allowed into the country and it is all has to be very precise and you can only bring over certain permitted items.

"At first, I had to think, what is contemporary dance? I found out that movement and rhythm is central to contemporary dance and then I had to look at how I would demonstrate that.

"When I had decided what I would do I had to look at what to bring with me and had to look at all the principles of design and how it would be judged. Flower arranging is very much like art and the same principles apply," Mary explained.

The nature of the competition meant that having got over the hurdle of getting her materials through customs and excise, Mary was faced with the next challenge of making her designs and vision into reality.

"When I went over I only had a mock-up and I knew what I was doing from sketches I had made. We started out there at 7am and we were working until 12noon putting it together. The arrangement finished at six feet high and was a life-size piece of a lady dancing. I made her legs and arms from sisal sheeting and then I used foliage for her skirt and bodice and flowers to bring in different textures. The arrangement was made up of anthuriums, roses, carnations, and calla lilies. The base colour was pink and this was followed up in through the design so pink and lime green were my dominant colours," she said.

Another challenge on the day for Mary included the strict enforcement of health and safety guidelines, which added an industrial aspect to the whole flower arranging experience.

"A new thing came in where we had to wear steel capped shoes and hard hats so that was an extra obstacle for both us and for the directors of the show, who had to find the shoes for us to wear," Mary explained.

Having completed her arrangement, the judging took place on the same day and Mary was in awe to have received a bronze ribbon for her entry. The flower-arranging exhibition itself took place from March 16, with the arrangement exhibition running until March 20. Throughout her week-long stay, Mary was put up by a host family in Canada.

"I was never in Canada before and the people treated us like royalty. My host was a lovely lady and she made us feel so welcome. She was showing me some of her traditional Canadian dishes and I made her traditional Irish soda bread so we were exchanging recipe ideas as well as flower-arranging ideas.

"The host families had parties for us each night and as a result we made great friends. While we were there Ireland won the bid for World Association of Floral Artists Show, which takes place in 2014 and so when the news came through the celebrations for that were better again.

"My husband came with me and I got great support from my work colleagues in the Mental Health Service in Ennis and also of course from the flower club in Ennis, who were all offering me bits and pieces," she added.

Asked what it is about flower arranging that she enjoys most, Mary revealed, "I love the competitiveness and the interpretation. I really love to get a theme and interpret it through flowers."

The person chosen to represent Ireland at the Canada Blooms international competition changes every year but

Mary is not hanging up her boots yet by any means and will continue to impress with her creative and elaborate flower-arranging designs.