



The Gabb family... Toni has been a useful creative help for Caspar, having herself attended art school.

any show in the world to exhibit at, it is Chelsea.

"It's going to be a tight squeeze to get there, but I think it'll be a tight squeeze for everyone else as well."

It's not as though he should really be lacking in confidence for the credentials are there. Since completing a degree in architectural and interior design in 1993, going to work at a garden design company in central London, he set up his own business, Natural Elements, in 1997.

Since then word has spread quickly and he has been responsible for designing gardens in London for the likes of writers Sebastian

Faulks and Kathy Lette, as well as Robbie Williams and Lloyd Webber.

Even though Caspar had never given serious thought to entering the show before – "it always appeared to be so much work" – he changed his mind back in August and phoned up for an application form thinking that he'd already missed the boat for this show and would have to wait for next year's.

He explains: "I actually had two months more to work on the application forms, the plans and three-dimensional image of the design. I found out in November that I'd been accepted into the small city category.

"I was over the moon, and even though I



was reasonably confident it was still fantastic when I was told I had been accepted – all incredibly exciting. There have been times since, though, when I've just thought I won't be able to get it ready in time!"

Things are beginning to come together and it doesn't take much imagination to envisage how the intention to create a sheltered clearing with mature specimen trees, tree ferns, driftwood totems and five hanging tower baskets will be achieved.

The space, Caspar explains, is designed to provide a feeling of seclusion to escape busy city life and is perhaps more wild and natural than those other exhibits in the same category, and less modern – even though it does have a faint contemporary feel to it.

The garden should be able to maintain continued interest through the year and will be sustainable so long as water is available (not a given by any means, given the current shortage in the South East).

There is a pathway of irregular paving and the boundaries are made from an open, curvy

and vertical woven willow design with discreet sections of mirror to help create a feeling of distance.

And there it is, in a very brief summary.

"It is inspired much more by a concept, creating an atmosphere inspired by a rain forest which I picked up when walking in Australia, New Zealand and Madeira," says Caspar, now relaxing with a cup of tea in his London home which he shares with wife Toni and three-year-old son, Theo.

Tropical

"The plant life is quite similar to what is in rainforests, with a slightly tropical effect. However, it is a space that makes it feel like a garden, rather than a jungle."

The Gabb family makes a handsome trio, and Caspar admits that while he hasn't been helped practically by his wife, she has been hugely supportive, being "great to bounce ideas off; she went to art school herself and is very creative".

Then, adding nervously: "I'm sure that she



Closer to home than Chelsea, Caspar used his design expertise in his parents' garden (above and centre).

will become even more of a help nearer the time even though she may become something of a Chelsea widow!"

When Chelsea's all over, we could be seeing a good deal more of the Gabb family in Shropshire. They have bought a house near Caspar's parents' home, where he spent much of his childhood, and the nice, juicy prospect of transforming their rural garden lies in store.

Although the capital has been responsible for the lion's share of Natural Elements' commissions, Caspar has had plenty of practice designing gardens in Shropshire, not least at his parents' home near Glazeley where he transformed a border and created a water pool.

"The bed, called the Billiard Bed, is a bit of a mid-summer bonanza, with all the flowers coming into bloom then, while the bog garden, or Pitt's Pool as we now prefer to call it, is more seasonal simply because water plants tend to fade away in the winter," he explains.

The next garden Caspar will be working on in this county is his own, by which time, if all goes well, there is every possibility that he will have joined an elite club as the winner of a fabled Chelsea Gold Medal.

❖ This year's Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show takes place between May 23 and May 27.