

Colleen plants success

By DAVID COHEN

Convent girl, lay missionary, mother-of-two, air hostess, writer, founder of one of WA's most-recognised businesses - Colleen Sheehan has done it all.

Colleen, who owns Weeding Women, will celebrate the 25th anniversary of her venture this month and says the secret to her success is persistence.

"It hasn't been easy," Colleen (62) said.

"It's a people business and for me it's about persistence and really, really good training.

"We have a reputation as being reliable hard workers, so my job is to ensure that standard is kept."

When she was 11, Colleen

went to Loreto Convent in Claremont.

"It was austere and strict: in those days you weren't allowed out," she said.

In the mid-70s Colleen became a lay missionary for the Catholic archdiocese of the Kimberley, then became a hostie with McRobertson Miller Airlines.

"It was during this time I met and married my husband," Colleen said.

"Air hostesses weren't permitted to marry, but many of us secretly had."

After having two children, Colleen got an English and comparative literature degree at Murdoch, separated, from her husband then spent a year in Fitzroy Crossing working on a national bicentennial project.

"The work took us in a 1000km radius around Fitzroy Crossing through the Fitzroy Valley," Colleen said.

"We spent our time in Aboriginal independent schools.

"It was remote, hot, lawless to non-Aboriginal kids and like nothing else my children had ever experienced.

"We spent our time swimming in the Fitzroy River and water holes, and in and out of bough shed schools with the dedicated non-Aboriginal teachers from around Australia.

"It was particularly tough on my daughter, and for both their sakes I was glad when it was over."

Back in Perth, Colleen needed help with a permaculture project.

"The men were so slow!" she said.

"I employed two female acquaintances who had beautiful gardens and who weren't working at the time.

"I convinced them to stay on and I'd find us more work."

The time was right: Burke's Backyard had just hit TV screens.

Colleen's team grew from two to 20 in a fortnight.

"All that home and garden stuff was just starting," Colleen said.

"It was a runaway train from day one.

"We still don't advertise and we're flat out."

Colleen sold her first franchise 17 years ago, and has added another three in the past two years.

"A woman in Rockingham said to me, 'I want your job'," Colleen said.

"I said, 'It's all yours', and



We did it ... Weeding Women franchisee Marion White does the business while company founder Colleen Sheehan looks on.

she was our first franchise."

In 25 years Weeding Women have worked more than half a million hours in 165,000 local gardens.

They have spread 7500 cubic metres of mulch - enough to treat Subiaco Oval more than five times over.

Colleen works two days a week from the "mother ship", the Osborne Park office with 12 vehicles and more than 12,000 clients.

A team of 42 staff includes a base network of 25 gardeners, the four franchisees, and nine support workers in administration and management.

On Tuesday, Colleen swung by Nedlands' Baird Street to swap gardening tips with a resident her western suburb franchisee, Marion White, looks after.

"I don't know why I'm doing this: I'm creaking," Colleen said, as she bent to inspect a

recently-planted jasmine.

Marion (53) was a geography and social sciences teacher and Water Corporation worker before taking up the franchise a year ago.

Business is good and this week she added a second car to her business and will branch into two teams.

"I love gardening and want to be surrounded by beautiful things," Marion said.

"It's weeding, pruning, and tidying up this time of year, then we'll move into mulching."

Marion practises what she preaches, and converted the sandpit at her Claremont home into a "little oasis".

"It is certainly much easier to regularly maintain a garden than it is to start from scratch or deal with a year's worth of weeds," Marion said.

"But in saying that, we do love a challenge!"

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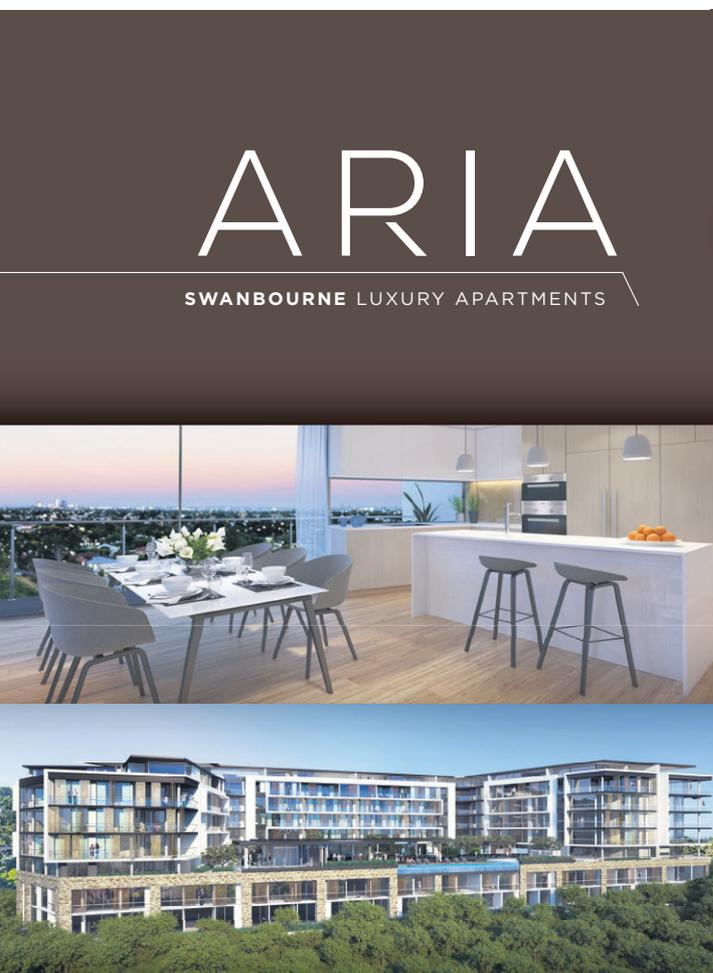
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