



# The Journal

Spring/Summer 2025

Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland  
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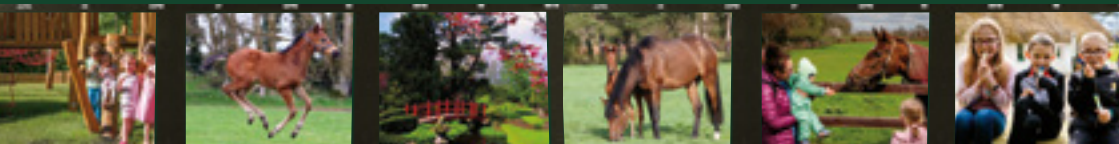


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# Note From The Chair



**T**he Galanthophiles were out in force this year, as eager to meet and chat as to admire the endless variations in these beautiful bulbs. Retail therapy too as there were plenty of opportunities to buy the classics and the rare. It was great to be out and about after a notably grey and stormy winter, snowdrops heralding the imminent arrival of spring – thank goodness!

Longer days and better weather will have many of you ordering plants and visiting garden centres. Please remember to support Irish growers and our independent small nurseries when you're shopping. Not only does this feel like the right thing to do, but it has self-interest in it too, as without these outlets

we lack the choice, variety and new plants which they carefully seek out and grow.

We have a relatively small gardening community in Ireland, a warm-hearted and generous group of people who enjoy meeting up and sharing thoughts and ideas. Think about introducing another person to this community by encouraging them to join our growing tradition by taking out membership of the RHSI. Together we can do more to grow, learn and enjoy the fine art of gardening, supporting Irish producers and strengthening our common interest in horticulture.

Happy Gardening.  
Philip  
Chair, RHSI





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# Note From The Editor



Editor caught at work

Hopefully the short, dark days of winter, and their associated dreadful storms, are behind us and the spring will bring longer days, soft breezes, and some warmth to the garden encouraging new growth and enabling the ground to be worked for new planting in both the herbaceous borders and the vegetable garden.

Gardens with snowdrops are still enjoying a good show but are being superseded by the crocus and daffodils which having come into their own are adding great splashes of colour to beds and borders. We must not forget the trees which are showing their appreciation of the time of year by putting on fine new, bright growth and we are waiting for the apple trees to break into blossom with the promise of tasty delights for the autumn.

Once again, we offer a range of articles which in this issue cover gardening at the National Stud in Co. Kildare, plant hunting in Yunnan, some of the historic gardens and estates in Co. Down, and the work being carried

out to save seeds and thereby preserve our future, plus – of course – all our favourites to keep us up-to-date with on-going work at Bellefield, Laurelmere, and Russborough.

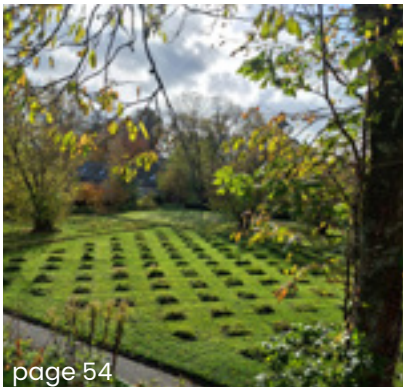
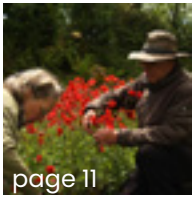
The construction of each issue of the journal depends not only the authors who take the time to write their excellent articles but the 'behind the scene team' of Mary, Noreen, Peggy, Orlaith, and Astrid who make it all happen. No praise is high enough for this great bunch of people.

I hope that this year will bring better conditions for the garden – last year seemed to be dominated by short spells of decent weather with long, long spells of overcast days and rain leading to a soggy end to the year. All we can do as gardeners is look forward to better weather and hope for the best.

As always, I give you my best wishes for good luck and good gardening,

Peter  
Editor, RHSI, *The Journal*

# Contents



- 6 Enhancing the Japanese Gardens at the Irish National Stud: A Vision for the Future  
John Smyth
- 11 A Lifetime of Commitment to Considered Growing  
Mary Hackett
- 16 Montalto Estate – Creating a Sustainable Future  
Lesley Heron
- 21 South of the Clouds – a midsummer expedition to Yunnan, southern China  
Seamus O'Brien
- 32 A Castle in the Mournes  
Mary Hackett
- 36 Hitting the Walls  
Derek McClure
- 39 RHSI News and Events  
Orlaith Murphy
- 43 From the Editor's Garden  
Peter and Nicola Milligan
- 47 Seeds of Hope – Establishing the National Seed Bank  
Derek Reidy
- 54 Bellefield – progress and plans for 2025 and beyond  
Paul Smyth
- 59 Floral Art  
Karen Robinson
- 62 Partner Gardens  
Noreen Keane
- 63 Russborough Notes  
Bernie Roddie
- 66 Laurelmere Cottage Garden  
Cherry Sleeman
- 69 The Kitchen Garden in Spring  
Wendy Nairn
- 72 Book Review – The Tree Hunters  
Peggy Masterson





# The Journal

Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland  
*Cumann Ríoga Gairneoireach na hÉireann*

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# **Enhancing the Japanese Gardens at the Irish National Stud: A Vision for the Future**

**John B. Smyth MHort (RHS) MglDa PG/Dip,  
Garden & Grounds Supervisor, Irish National Stud**

***A New Chapter at the Japanese Gardens***





Japanese Gardens Teahouse

**T**he Japanese Gardens at the Irish National Stud in Kildare are a jewel in Ireland's horticultural heritage. Created between 1904 and 1910, they were the vision of Scottish-born William Hall Walker (1856–1933), an eccentric horse breeder who believed the stars dictated a racehorse's fate. His interest in astrology extended beyond the stables—he saw potential in a Japanese-style garden that would symbolise the journey of life.

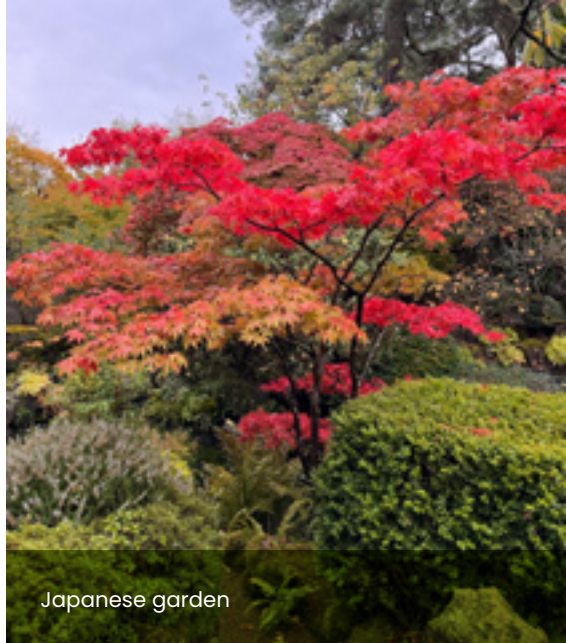
To bring this vision to life, he commissioned Master Gardener Tassa Eida, whom he had met at an exhibition, to craft a masterpiece at Tully in Kildare. With a team of 40 men, Eida constructed a garden of harmony and symbolism, where winding paths, still water, and sculpted flora narrated life's journey. Bonsai, cloud-pruned conifers, and ancient larch trees, already half a century old when they arrived from Japan, were carefully positioned

to illustrate humanity's ability to shape nature. Today, these venerable specimens continue to stand in all their glory.

One of the most intriguing stories of their collaboration involved a wager on the *Trachycarpus fortunei*, a hardy palm tree. Eida insisted it wouldn't survive Kildare's harsh winters; Hall Walker, ever the optimist, disagreed. The bet was placed. Seasons passed, and the palm endured. At a celebratory dinner marking the garden's completion, Hall Walker reminded Eida of the wager. When asked about Japanese wisdom, Eida quoted his mother's warning: "Beware the horns of a cow, the heels of a horse, and the smile of an English gentleman." With no money left to settle his loss, Eida departed Ireland penniless and, sadly, never returned to Japan. Yet his legacy endures in every carefully placed stone, pond, and meticulously pruned tree—a testament to his artistry and vision.



Japanese garden



Japanese garden

## Preserving a living masterpiece while enhancing the planting scheme

Today, as custodians of this historic treasure, we are privileged to continue the work of those who came before us. The garden's 'bones' remain strong, a testament to Eida's original design. But like any living landscape, it requires thoughtful rejuvenation to maintain its beauty and vitality.

John B. Smyth (MHort) RHS, master gardener and designer, is now responsible for revitalising the garden over the next three years with his dedicated team led by Brian Murphy. Their restoration begins by revitalising the garden's planting pockets which have depleted over time. By replenishing them with nutrient-rich organic matter and carefully selecting Japanese perennials, they aim to breathe new life into this tranquil space. The grotto will be refreshed with delicate underplanting, while the iconic

red bridge will once again be framed by the grandeur of mature Magnolias and Camellias.

Specifically, they plan to introduce *Magnolia wilsonii* and *Magnolia grandiflora*, along with *Camellia japonica* specimens sourced from Ravensberg Nurseries. These plants along with hundreds of new perennials will not only enhance the botanical display but also honour the garden's history by maintaining its authentic character.

## The Art of Niwaki: Sculpting time and space

A key aspect of the restoration is Niwaki, the Japanese art of cloud pruning. This technique shapes trees into elegant, sculptural forms that echo Japan's windswept coastal pines. The garden's aged Junipers, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* (Hinoki Cypress), and other venerable





River

## “Pruning, to Smyth, is an act of reverence”

specimens will be sensitively refined, ensuring they continue to frame the landscape with timeless grace.

Pruning, to Smyth, is an act of reverence. It is one of the most mindful and rewarding tasks in horticulture. As he shapes the garden, he often thinks of his dear friend, the late Dermot O'Neill, who had a deep appreciation for the form and artistry of cloud pruning. He also recalls the lessons imparted to him by William Waterfield, who taught him this technique at Le Jardin Clos du Peyronnet in France. Their influence continues to guide his approach as he

and his team breathe new life into these ancient trees.

### **Honouring tradition while looking forward**

Some see this garden as a representation rather than a strict replication of a Japanese garden, and in many ways, they are right. But the team is committed to deepening its authenticity while respecting its legacy. By blending tradition with thoughtful innovation, they will ensure that the Japanese Gardens remain a beacon of tranquility and inspiration for generations to come.

Restoration is an ongoing journey—a continuous conversation between past and future, between nature and the hands that shape it. It is a privilege to be part of this garden's story, and the team looks forward to welcoming visitors to share in its beauty, serenity, and enduring legacy. ■

# Donegal

## GARDEN TRAIL

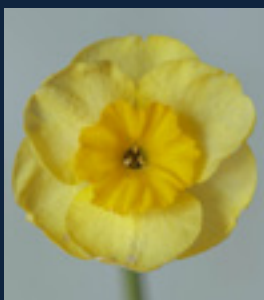
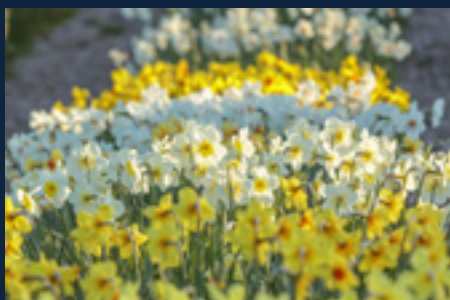
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Gert and Elisabeth Stam

# A Lifetime of Commitment to Considered Growing

**Gert and Elisabeth Stam of Caherhurley Nursery are winding down**

**D**o you prefer to buy plants from a nursery that grows specifically for the Irish climate? Do you juggle natives and organic plant varieties to keep your garden pollinators happy? If you've answered Yes and Yes, An Post probably does regular drops to your front door of damp cardboard boxes stuffed with little pots from Caherhurley Nursery, Bodyke, Co Clare where Gert and Elisabeth Stam grow plants on the side of a windy hill overlooking Lough Derg. Time and ill health are catching up with Gert. Their nursery will close to visitors at the end of July with final orders leaving the packing house at the end of April.

This story, or at least the Irish part of it, begins with a horse. The Stams were the first to import the pure-blood

Babson Arabian, the original Bedouin horse, to Europe. While still living in Ochten, eastern Netherlands, they participated in closed-herd breeding groups. The sale of one of their horses brought Elisabeth to Limerick. Purchase of the farm at Bodyke in the foothills of Slieve Bernagh Mountain followed. The Stams intended to breed horses and enjoy semi-retirement in Co Clare. As things worked out, Gert and Elisabeth began to propagate perennial stock from plants they had brought to Clare with them from their Dutch garden. Selling their plants at Ennis Farmers' Market led eventually to selling at specialist Plant Fairs from Belfast to Cork. "People were so nice", Gert Stam remembers. "Ennis gardeners expected to buy annuals. My perennials in their little pots were a bit odd. But people were openminded and willing to try something new". When Gert was diagnosed with cancer in 2014, travel to fairs and shows became impossible. But if the Stams couldn't get to their customers, they could invite the customers to come to them. The nursery at Bodyke opened to the public in 2019. Many customers it transpired preferred to visit Caherhurley rather than have brief encounters at plant fairs. When Covid struck, Mies Stam helped her parents set up on-line sales and the phenomenon that is Caherhurley by post was born. About one third of the nursery's sales continue to be processed on-line. Forty crates of plants were lined up for dispatch when I visited on a quiet morning in February. The nursery was crammed with up to 50,000 plants in half-litre pots ready for the Spring rush.

Caherhurley is the only Irish nursery to sell certified organic



Elisabeth, Negma and Sharif



Gert

plants at present. Everything they sell is propagated on site. Nothing is sprayed; no chemicals are used. The environmental harm caused by indiscriminate use of pesticides was a lesson learnt early in life. Gert remembers Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* being discussed "for months" around the Stam family table. "Organic growing is for everyone", Gert tells me firmly. "My own medical issues have helped me to understand that it is our business to look after our health and the health of everything around us.



*Primula Elisabeth Browning*



*Cardamine raphanifolia*

Living in Clare, the Stams are aware of how official biodiversity policy favours tree planting over support for pollinators. "There are many trees including the hawthorn and whitethorn that are pollinator friendly, and these should be favoured over oak and similar trees that do not support our pollinator population. But herbaceous perennial plants are also essential for foraging insects". Gert also has views on wildflower gardening. "I agree with growing native plants especially in hedgerows and woodland but planting a wide range of native and non-native trees, shrubs and perennials in gardens can offer year-round sustenance and safe haven to insects and birds".

Caherhurley nursery grows a range of unusual plants with an established record of good performance in the garden. Walking through the nursery with Gert, he points out *Primula*

'Elisabeth Browning' a very early creamy-white flowering primrose with a yellow eye for moist, humus-rich soil in sun or partial shade, ideal for woodland gardens. *Anemonopsis macrophylla* is another beautiful plant for humus-rich partial shade. *Cardamine raphanifolia* comes from Carl Wright's Garden, Caher Bridge in the Burren. Two hardy *Lobelia siphilitica*, 'Sylvia' a pale mauve and an unnamed deep sea-blue, offer alternatives to the widely available pale blue. *Serratula tinctoria* var. *seoanei* is for autumn colour in front of bedding. Caherhurley specialise in umbellifers. Gert draws my attention to *Chaerophyllum azoricum* with white, fragrant, cow-parsley like flower heads and attractively serrated leaves. For wild or cottage garden schemes. *Haloragis erecta* 'Wellington Bronze' is not as well-known as Gert would like it to be. An upright semi-evergreen perennial to 60cm tall, with glossy, bronze, coarsely



toothed leaves on reddish stems, and inconspicuous reddish flowers in early autumn, it is useful for knitting a border together. Going back to the importance of pollinators, *Trachystemon orientalis* is in flower in February in the Caherhurley garden, providing valuable early pollen for bumble bees.

## **“A visit to the nursery will offer even more temptation”**

The Caherhurley website includes useful lists of plants for specific places. Be aware that the plant list on the website is not comprehensive. A visit to the nursery will offer even more temptation. For garden design and plant selection, Kate O'Shaughnessy is a central part of the Caherhurley nursery team. It is possible to pre-book a one-on-one consultation with Kate through the nursery website. When Caherhurley closes at the end of 2025, Kate will move to propagating plants in her own garden not far from Ennis. The longer-term plan is to develop her business Albury Nursery as a garden design business with a small specialised growing unit.

Caherhurley nursery is an adventure playground for plant lovers of every stripe. You remember I told you they had 50,000 plants on site ready for the Spring rush? That's 50,000 minus a few dozen nestled in the boot and back seat of my car for the journey back to Dublin. No gardener could have resisted the temptation! ■



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# Montalto Estate

Creating a sustainable future

Lesley Heron

**A**t Montalto Estate, sustainability and biodiversity are not just trends, for us they have been core values for years. We have long been committed to reducing our carbon footprint while fostering biodiversity across the estate. As a family-owned and run estate, our ethos of living in harmony with nature has always been central to our operations. Our goal is to balance business needs with ethical responsibility, a mission we have been refining over time.

We have set up a dedicated composting area on the estate, allowing us to produce large quantities of rich, nourishing compost each year to feed our gardens. This vital resource is complemented by our collection of





leaves, which we allow to decompose into nutrient-rich leaf mould. Another resource we have in abundance, thanks to our Café, is coffee grounds – rich in nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. We re-purpose them in three main ways: enriching the soil around acid-loving plants like camellias and rhododendrons, using them as mulch to deter slugs from plants like hostas, and incorporating them into our compost.

The estate's typically windy weather and abundant wooded areas provide a steady supply of wood, branches, and small debris. We chip this material and use it as a natural mulch in our garden beds, under trees, and even in our play park. Not only does this help recycle the debris, but it also suppresses weeds,



reducing our reliance on chemical weed control. For the many events we host at Montalto, we often need floral displays, which we source primarily from our own gardens, significantly reducing the carbon footprint associated with importing flowers. We plant for many purposes – beauty, shelter,



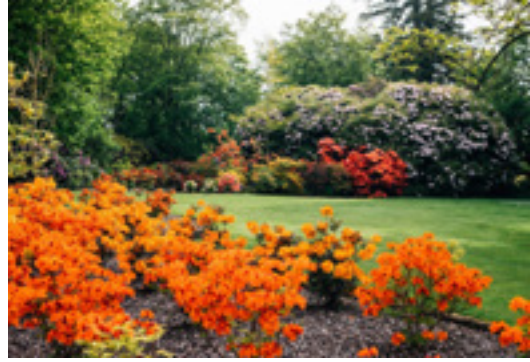
structure, habitat, and pollination. A standout example is the wildflower meadow beneath our apple orchard, planted with native species to attract pollinators. It has become a haven for bees and butterflies, buzzing with life when in bloom. Throughout the estate, we have created other pollinator-friendly areas, ensuring our pollinators have access to pollen year-round and this spring we are re-introducing beehives on our estate.

In our glasshouse, we have redesigned the space to house plants that thrive in an unheated environment, allowing them to flourish year-round without the need for constant temperature control. Our Café's "Garden to Garnish" menu showcases the best of our home grown produce - proving that nothing beats the taste of freshly harvested fruit and vegetables straight from the garden.

## **Beyond the Garden**

Our forestry management plays a crucial role in supporting biodiversity, particularly through the vital presence of invertebrates. By nurturing a diverse range of native trees, we have created significant ecological benefits. When these trees die, some are left to decompose on the ground, while others remain standing, with any dangerous branches removed for safety. These trees provide valuable differing habitats for invertebrates and fungi, contributing to the overall health of the ecosystem. In addition, we have worked to restore areas once used for agriculture by replanting them with native trees, creating vital wildlife habitats, improving soil stability on our steeper slopes, and helping with flood prevention in lowland areas. To manage the forest floor, we have introduced heritage pigs, which help





control invasive plants while promoting a healthy balance of native flora and fauna.

Sustainability is always at the heart of our practices. We have installed water collection tanks to capture rainwater from our roofs, which is then used throughout the estate, reducing our reliance on external water sources. In efforts to further reduce our environmental impact, we're transitioning from petrol-powered tools to battery-powered alternatives, minimising emissions and ensuring our equipment runs on sustainable power. As with many large estates, invasive species present a challenge, and our gardening team is actively working to manage and reduce their spread, with a commitment to eradicating them over time to protect our native habitats.



Supporting local communities is also a key focus, and we have prioritised sourcing from local suppliers for our café, ensuring low food miles and high-quality standards. We continue to seek out new and exciting local producers, helping to bolster businesses close to home.



Looking ahead as a business, we are committed to continuously improving our sustainability and biodiversity

efforts. We are currently exploring initiatives like waste management, solar energy, and the creation of bee highways, to name just a few. Our goal is to leave a positive legacy for future generations and to educate our visitors on the sustainable practices we have adopted to support this vision. ■





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# South of the Clouds

## A midsummer expedition to Yunnan, western China

*In search of Kingdon Ward's blue poppy*

**Seamus O'Brien**

Taizi Temple (lower)  
Minyong Glacier Yunnan

The province of Yunnan in south-west China has long been a mecca for visiting botanists and horticulturists, with half of all China's plant and animal species, and no less than 25 ethnic groups, living in habitats as diverse as tropical rainforest on the Laos border to icy slopes on the Tibetan frontier regions. I had been to Yunnan on successive autumn expeditions in the past, but never during the summer flowering season.

In the autumn of 2023, therefore, I contacted Zhi Jiang He (Dennis He), a tour operator based in Lijiang, north-

west Yunnan, about the possibility of bringing a botanical group to north-west Yunnan in the summer of 2024. I had stumbled across Dennis on social media when he posted an image of the Cambridge-blue poppy, *Meconopsis speciosa* and this caught my attention. Though discovered by the Scottish plant hunter George Forrest (1873–1932) in 1905, this species is also heavily associated with Captain Frank Kingdon Ward (1885–1958), the English explorer and plant collector. Kingdon Ward wrote several books about his travels, one of the most famous being his *Land of the Blue Poppy* (1913), a narrative of his





Black Dragon Pool Park, Lijiang Yunnan

journey through north-west Yunnan and adjacent south-east Tibet during his 1911 expedition when he collected for Arthur Kilpin Bulley (1861-1942), founder of Bees Nurseries in Cheshire.

### In search of a blue poppy

The overarching aim of our visit was to locate and photograph *Meconopsis speciosa* (the actual blue poppy of Kingdon Ward's Land of the Blue Poppy) and to visit as many places explored by the plant hunter as possible. In this respect Dennis He became an incredibly important contact in China and he later proved to be a knowledgeable and enthusiastic plantsman having previously organised expeditions for Danish, French and German Rhododendron enthusiasts.

In advance of the trip, I had created spreadsheets of Kingdon Ward's field notes, outlining where he had collected in Yunnan during his 1911, 1913, 1921 and 1922 expeditions for various different expedition subscribers. This gave a



*Meconopsis speciosa*

complete picture of what he collected, and where he collected, what proved to be new species at the time, and what he introduced to cultivation. Accounts of his expeditionary travels, either published in his regular column in The Gardeners' Chronicle or through his books also painted a clear picture of the places that became important bases and of the people he met – European customs officers, French missionaries, important Chinese officials, local kings





Meili Snow Mountain

and village headmen, all of whom smoothed (or blocked) his way while he explored this corner of north west Yunnan. With this, we departed Dublin in late June relatively well-informed on what we might encounter over the following three weeks.

This was not a collecting expedition and no seeds were gathered. I'm currently writing a biography of Kingdon Ward and so instead we departed with notebooks crammed with plant names and thousands of photographs of plants in bloom, particularly of *Rhododendron*, *Primula*, *Roscoea*, *Meconopsis* and many of the other genera for which this biological hotspot is famous. We were a group of seven, all from Ireland (including John Anderson who joined us from the Savill Gardens in Windsor Great Park), and for 18 days we trekked across the mountains and moorlands of the mountain ranges that divide Yunnan's great rivers; the Yangtze, the Mekong and the Salween.

### Lijiang – Venice of the Orient

Our travels in China began on June 22nd when we caught a flight from



Iris Root Rot



A replanted rhizome

Shanghai at the mouth of the sprawling Yangtze delta, to Lijiang, an ancient city located near the upper course of the Yangtze, at this point also known as the Jinsha or 'river of golden sand' (gold was panned from the river in the past).

## “Lijiang has little changed since the days of the great plant hunters”

Frank Kingdon Ward visited Lijiang several times, though he limited his stay there since George Forrest jealously guarded his territory and had made it absolutely clear that this part of Yunnan was 'his country' and Kingdon Ward was not to carry out any collecting work there. Lijiang has little changed since the days of the great plant hunters, Pere Jean-Marie Delavay (1834–1895) and Joseph Rock (1884–1962) also stayed there while collecting on nearby Jade Dragon Snow Mountain (5596 m). We stayed in the old town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the best-preserved ancient towns in Western China. 'Venice of the Orient' seems an apt sobriquet given its many canals and our botanising got off to a good start when we spotted rose-coloured forms of *Magnolia delavayi* in a hotel garden and also occasionally as a street tree. Other street trees included *Celtis sinensis*, *Cupressus duclouxiana* (more anon.), *Taxus chinensis*, *Picea*

*likiangensis* (named for the region, Lijiang was known to the early plant hunters as Likiang) and *Platycladus orientalis*. Lijiang is a stronghold of the Naxi people, one of the many ethnic groups in Yunnan, the Austrian-American plant hunter Joseph Rock produced a dictionary of their language while he was based in the area. Not far from the old town is Black Dragon Pool Park, a classic Qing Dynasty Garden with lakes, pavilions, temples and bridges and with superb trees like the mourning cypress, *Cupressus funebris*. From Lijiang we travelled to mountains above nearby Wenhai Lake on the southern slopes of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. We were fortunate to visit at optimum flowering season. Among the stars was a huge white roadside rose with cascading stems which Michael Marriott (David Austin roses) believes to be a form of *Rosa filipes*. The surrounding forests were mainly composed of *Pinus armandii* and the ubiquitous *Pinus yunnanensis*, interspersed with *Populus rotundifolia* (similar to the European *P. tremula*). *Thalictrum delavayi* and *Hypericum forrestii* were quite common and served as a reminder of the early botanical pioneers in the region, and in glades, the damp marshes were painted purple by drifts of *Primula bulleyana* subsp. *beesiana*. *Roscoea cautleyoides* was also abundant and appeared in both yellow and purple-flowered forms.

### Shangri La and the heavenly lake

Zhongdian, or Shangri La as it is now known, is a city on a broad plateau (a lake in prehistoric times). I first visited it as a rural town in 1996 and was amazing to see it developed as a major city of over a million people



First bend on Yangtze River  
near Benzilan

just decades later. Kingdon Ward knew it as Chungtien and it was on the nearby Chung River that he discovered *Primula chungensis*, a candelabra species that's still widely grown in gardens. While based there we visited the Shangri La Alpine Botanic Gardens which gave us a good idea of what we would see in the following days and the gardens provided a great vantage point from which to view the emerald-green Zhongdian Plateau, a Tibetan stronghold.

One of the real highlights of the trip was a visit to Tian Chi (Heavenly Lake). I had previously visited the lake in October 1996, in the autumn season when the moorland surrounding the lake shore was carpeted with the ice-blue trumpet blossoms of *Gentiana sino-ornata*. We spent our day wading through hundreds of acres of waist high *Primula sikkimensis* and *P. secundiflora* interspersed with the towering creamy spikes of *Rheum alexandrae*, a spectacular perennial named for

Alexandra of Denmark, wife of Edward VII. On the lake shore were extensive thickets of purple-flowered alpine rhododendrons (*R. rupicola*) and the largest flowered form of *Rosa sericea* I've ever seen.

Our most exciting finds at 99 Dragon Pool, at the edge of dense forests of *Abies georgei* (then bedecked in blue upright cones), was *Meconopsis beatification*, then in full bloom, the first of many blue poppies we were to encounter.

On the Wudi Lake pass the rains set in – in earnest. It was monsoon season and we soon became accustomed to constant downpours and drenchings. It was worth it though, to see entire mountain slopes painted by the blossoms of several *Rhododendron* species, best of which were *R. rupicola* var. *chryseum* and *R. aganniphum*, two of Kingdon Ward's Yunnan finest discoveries. Higher still on the alpine screes we were to encounter dozens





*Rhododendron selense* below Dokar La

of the butter-yellow lampshade poppywort, *Meconopsis lijiangensis* in bloom, alongside a diminutive form of the ink-blue *Meconopsis rudis*.

### The Yangtze-Mekong divide

Kingdon Ward was based during his 1911 and 1913 travels at the little village of Deqen (then Atuntze) in the upper Yangtze- Mekong divide and so this region became an important part of our travels. It was a really welcome change to leave the monsoon behind us (albeit for a brief period) to enter the hot, dry, arid Yangtze valley. In 1911 Kingdon Ward stayed at the Buddhist Dongzhulin monastery near the arid upper Yangtze valley and we spent a magical few hours there exploring its many golden-roofed temples.

Our next stop was the Beima Shan, botanically one of the most famous peaks in Yunnan. We had timed our



*Primula gemmifera* subsp. *amoena*

visit perfectly, the entire upper alpine part of the mountain was smothered in *Rhododendron* blossoms, particularly by the rose-purple flowered *R. saluenense* var. *chameunum*, though the real star on this mountain was the exquisite lilac-blue *Primula gemmifera* subsp. *amoena*.

From there our travels continued westward across the Yangtze-Mekong divide. My best memory of arriving at the arid upper Mekong valley was walking with John Anderson and Colin Jones to a riverside grove of mammoth trees of *Cupressus duclouxiana* that must have been centuries old. We had just planted youngsters at Kilmacurragh, supplied by the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh as part of their International Conifer Conservation Programme, so it was wonderful to see these old veterans in their native habitat.

From the hot, arid Mekong valley we travelled on to explore the Mingyong Glacier. It was amazing to see just how rapidly the landscape of the Mekong region changed from arid desert-like conditions to lush temperate rainforest. Mingyong lies on the lower slopes of Meili Snow Mountain (6740 m), one of the sacred mountains of China. Two beautifully located golden-roofed monasteries flank the steep glacier and we met scores of Buddhist monks and nuns who were on pilgrimage from Lhasa in Tibet.

The Minyong Glacier is the lowest glacier in China and the photograph of it, taken by Frank Kingdon Ward in June 1913, is used by Chinese climatologists to chart the retreat of the ice, which has been significant over the last hundred



Zhongdian Plateau Shangri La

years (several kilometres). The glacier is the type locality of *Cotoneaster wardii*, though the most impressive plants growing there were the many mammoth trees of *Pseudotsuga sinensis* var. *forrestii* (a Kingdon Ward discovery despite the varietal epithet) and *Picea brachytyla*.

### The Dokar La

The Dokar La is an important mountain pass on the Buddhist pilgrim route around Meili Snow Mountain. Kingdon Ward was the first Westerner to explore this area and also the first foreigner to complete the pilgrim route. It is also the type locality of the yellow-flowered *Rhododendron wardii*, an important



*Cardiocrinum giganteum* and me on descent from Dokar La



*Primula biserrata*

species used to breed many of the best yellow-flowered hybrids. By the time of our arrival there it was July 1st and the monsoon was in full flight with rarely a break from the drenching rains. Among the many memorable highlights of trekking towards this remote pass was wading through hundreds of 4 m tall giant lilies, *Cardiocrinum giganteum* in birch (*Betula utilis*) woodland and staying in a campsite on the tree-line surrounded by thickets of duck egg blue *Berberis dokerlaica*, a recently-named species that's endemic to the Dokar La.

Higher still, the scarlet blossoms of *Rhododendron sanguineum* made the steep snow-choked gullies look as though lava was descending from the highest peaks and rhododendrons in every hue lit up the landscape. The Dokar La was simply spectacular and incredibly rich in good garden plants. I'll never forget sitting on the steep scree slopes among tens of thousands of purple-black *Lilium souliei* (named for the famous French missionary who botanised near the pass) and crossing ice fields to climb a steep zig-zag track that lead to the pass, where millions of prayer flags blew on the wind. We crossed the same pass into Tibet, where on the crags we photographed *Paraquilegia microphylla*, the holy grail of alpine connoisseurs.



*Magnolia delavayi* rose-coloured form





Dongzhulin Monastery near Benzilan



*Primula sikkimensis* and *Primula secundiflora*, Tianchi Lake



Prayer flags on Dokar La

At Cizhong, a small town on the banks of the Mekong River we visited the church built by the French missionary and plant collector, Pere Jean Théodore Monbeig-Andrieu (1875-1914). Kingdon Ward often visited these missionaries and we attended mass in the old church one evening, where, as we joined the Tibetan congregation, thoughts of the French missionary plant collectors came to mind, and of the hard and often dangerous lives they lived, far from the comforts of Paris.

### On the Mekong-Salween divide

From Cizhong our travels took us further west. We were then on the Mekong-Salween divide, and the closer we got to the Salween River the heavier the rains drove down. On the Peacock pass, in the swirling mist and ice fields we passed mountainsides covered in tens of thousands of golden *Primula biserrata*, with beautifully two-toned blossoms in shades of mustard and butter-yellow. Nearby were thickets of

stately *Meconopsis sulphurea* and the Tibetan slipper-orchid, *Cypripedium tibeticum*, with bold purple pouch-shaped blossoms above gloriously pleated foliage.

This is one of the wettest parts of Yunnan, and by then the monsoon was at its furious worst. We endured incredible soakings and walked off the mist-shrouded mountain with half its leech population clinging to our blood-soaked feet and legs. Enough was enough, we were not going to find our ultimate goal, *Meconopsis speciosa*, on these wet peaks and so we returned to the drier Yangtze-Mekong divide and climbed to 4,650 m on the steep scree slopes of the Beima Shan's southern flank, where exhausted and breathless we finally spied the Cambridge-blue poppy, *Meconopsis speciosa*. It's a rare sight even in Yunnan, we found less than a dozen plants and this species has stubbornly refused all efforts in cultivation, so the only way to see it is to travel thousands of miles to Western China and climb high-lying scree slopes during the height of the Indian monsoon. From experience I can tell you it's worth every effort.

It was the highlight of our trip and I can still remember the excitement of the group when we first spotted those glorious blue blossoms on the steep bare screes. Beima Shan gave us a day of incredibly good botanising among some of China's rarest and most exquisite alpine and it was a perfect place to conclude our travels.

At the end of three weeks of travel in Yunnan we voted the Dokar La 'place of the trip' and the following 'plants of the trip':



*Meconopsis speciosa*

1. *Meconopsis speciosa*
2. *Cardiocrinum giganteum*
3. *Cupressus duclouxiana*
3. *Pseudotsuga sinensis* var. *forrestii* ■

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# A Castle in the Mournes

**Mary Hackett talks to Jamie McCormack, Head Gardener, Ballyedmond Castle Garden**

**H**ow to draw together the many strands that make up Ballyedmond Castle Garden for the Journal reader? There's the magnificent location, the Mourne Mountains behind and Carlingford Lough spreading out in front. There's the formally designed landscape created to display the late Lord Ballyedmond's collection of fountains, statues and follies. There's the softening and interpretation of that formal design, instigated by Lady Ballyedmond and her head gardener Jamie McCormack since 2014. And there are the underpinnings – the greenhouses, the heated propagation house – all essential to this seventy-acre farm and garden estate. "It's a young garden," Jamie McCormack says. As a developing



Echiums in the Mediterrean Border

space, it is free of the shackles that might inhibit a heritage garden. With six plant-mad gardeners on site, it is meticulously maintained.

Edward Haughey, Lord Ballyedmond, was a dedicated collector. From local salvage yards and demolition sites as much as from European auction rooms he accumulated an extraordinary range of decorative garden elements. Never a man to worry about what other people thought, he could see how to combine the ersatz with the classical. A Mediterranean terrace on the south side of the house leads the eye to a lower level, where the space includes a number of garden 'rooms' designed on a gentle arc across extensive lawns. All of these areas incorporate elements from Lord Ballyedmond's trove.

Jamie's background was with the Eden Project in Cornwall, so his pride in the recently developed Mediterranean

terrace by the house is not surprising. Planning and creating this feature was a lock-down project for the estate's gardeners. Ballyedmond has a mild climate with very little frost. The geology here is shaley. Drainage on the sloping bank was reinforced with hardcore. Southern Hemisphere and semi-arid plants are doing well. Echium, featuring *Echium wildpretii* and succulents including Puya a native of the Andes Mountains and Agave native to the arid regions of the Americas, all thrive. Amarines, Amaryllis and Nerines are multiplying. Italian cypress, some grown from seed sourced on the family's estate in Provence, punctuate the terrace. Watsonia and Dierama with other tropical and subtropical plants are used here and in the wider garden planting. Beth Chatto's dry garden was an inspiration for Jamie who continues to work on developing an understory of rockery plants which he is encouraging to seed into the wide gravel paths.





Leaf garden in summer

The woodland walk is peaceful, and the newly created stumpery offers eye-level views of ferns and other woodland jewels. The Ballyedmond black-tailed squirrel was absent when I visited, but you might be lucky. Among several charming garden rooms, I was particularly taken by the Leaf Garden. A high *Griselinia* hedge protects *Zinnia*, *Acacia pravissima*, *Tetrapanax papyrifer* and *Amicia zygomeris*. The combination of leaf shape and structure with flashes of colour is exquisite.

This is a multi-season garden. Spring brings an exceptional display of magnolias planted by the Haughey family in the 1990s with new varieties added in recent years. Mount Congreve

in Waterford is believed to have been the inspiration for this planting. Rhododendrons are another strength. One of the gardening team is crossing varieties in the hope of breeding a flower worthy of the Ballyedmond name. The Mediterranean Terrace is spectacular in early summer. Mid-summer displays the landscaping including the wildflower meadows developed in the last decade.

I suspect the walled garden and specifically the Orangery is the highlight of many visits to Ballyedmond Castle. The impressive staircase branching left and right was one of Lord Ballyedmond's salvage projects. Statues from his collection line the





Woodland garden in May



Walled garden borders

steps and a Versailles-worthy fountain explodes at the base. Many readers will remember the department store Robinson and Cleaver which dominated Donegall Square in Belfast. As it was being demolished in the 1990s, Lord Ballyedmond purchased both the impressive interior staircase and one of the two statues that had stood at the base of that staircase. The statue of Britannia on the left was lost in the shop's demolition, but Erin, which was the right-hand statue, now stands outside the Ballyedmond orangery doors. Robinson and Cleaver's staircase has been incorporated into the interior of Ballyedmond Castle.

Garden tours are offered refreshments in the Orangery. While enjoying the scones, you might like to know that two of the garden walls are 17th century, the oldest structures on the estate. When I visited in September 2024, Jamie and his team were digging up the perennial beds in the

walled garden with the intention of reinvigorating the displays for 2025.

Visiting Ballyedmond Castle Garden is only possible as part of a prearranged group tour. The family allow about ten tours each year between early April and mid-September. Tours are of the garden only. The house is not open to visitors. Accessibility should be considered. Ballyedmond is a large multi-level garden with bark and gravel paths unsuitable for walking aids or wheelchairs. No dogs allowed but guide dogs welcomed. This is not a garden of interest to children. A small nursery area has plants propagated from garden stock. The Orangery offers coffee and scones, a light lunch or afternoon tea by prior arrangement with the group organiser. ■

**Ballyedmond Castle Garden,  
Rostrevor, Co Down  
For Group Tour arrangements  
contact Jamie McCormack  
[jamiemccormack@mourneden.com](mailto:jamiemccormack@mourneden.com)**



# Hitting the Walls

**T**hey were ready to down tools and give up. The soil in the beds was hard, compacted, of poor quality and left untouched for five years.

When the small band of volunteers signed up to reinvigorate the unused vegetable beds in the historic Walled Garden in the city of Bangor, County Down, they underestimated how hard a job it would be.





Fresh produce for the visitors

The nine beds sit in Bangor's Walled Garden, which is part of Castle Park in the city. The private garden was created in the 1840s by the Ward family, owners of Bangor Castle. At the time the gardens provided vegetables, fruit and flowers for the Big House.

The garden fell into decline following World War I, and the local council took over. It was converted into a storage space in the 1990s before a £1 million renovation project saw the garden reopen to the public in 2009.

The Bangor Horticultural Society celebrated its 100th year in 2023 and as part of the celebrations some members agreed to look after the plots and establish vegetable beds which had not been tended since before the pandemic. Led by the society's secretary Derek McClure, a band of 5

volunteers began work on the beds in the Spring of 2024. But the ground was compacted and heavy. It took weeks of back breaking work and lots of fish, blood and bonemeal to try to get them into an acceptable state for sowing.

The volunteers thought improving the soil was the hard bit, but when they managed to finally sow seeds and plant out – the pigeons and crows were another problem, devouring all the young, fresh growth.

Derek McClure said it felt as though the volunteers, like athletes, had hit the wall. Or indeed the garden walls.

"We tried everything we could find to scare them off – CDs, silver tape and many members of the public had wise tales on how to scare the birds off, but nothing worked," Derek reflected.





Herbs galore

He said, "After putting netting over the plants we started to get a great response from the public who felt the mixture of vegetables and flowers in the same bed put on a great show."

The beds started to produce. And produce. The huge bounty of organic fruit and vegetables was donated weekly to a local project in the nearby town of Newtownards.

In September, during the now annual Chilli Festival in the Walled Garden, the volunteers set up a fruit and vegetable stall for the public. In return for a small charity donation, the stall offered lettuces, eating and cooking apples from the old fruit trees, onions, carrots, herbs and – as people waited in the queue – a constant supply of freshly dug potatoes.

The stall, set up for just a few hours over one weekend, raised several hundred pounds for the Mayor of Ards and North Down's chosen charities.

Demand was high and it has sparked the potential for more regular vegetable stalls in the summer months.

Bangor's Walled Garden is once again producing for a new generation. ■



Walled Garden volunteers with Mayor Alistair Cathcart



Fresh from the garden

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Sun 18th May	RHSI Russborough Garden Show
Sat 7th, Sun 8th June	Bellefield Open Weekend
Wed 11th June	Tour of Cork Gardens – ex Cork
Sat 5th July	Tour of gardens of Wexford – ex Dublin
Sat 19th July	Day tour to Bellefield and Heywood Gardens – ex Dublin
Sat 19th and Sun 20th July	Bellefield Open Weekend
Sat 6th Sept	Day tour ex Dublin to Tullyally castle and gardens
17th Sept	Zoom Talk, 7.30pm
1st Oct	Zoom Talk, 7.30pm
Sat 4th – Sun 5th Oct	Bellefield Open Weekend
15th Oct	Zoom Talk, 7.30pm – Wild Acres Wicklow
5th Nov	Zoom Talk, 7.30pm
19th Nov	Zoom Talk, 7.30pm
3rd Dec	Zoom Talk, 7.30pm
Sat 6th	Christmas Lunch in the National Yacht Club, Dunlaoghaire

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• 2025 •

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# From the Editor's Garden

**Peter Milligan and  
Nicola Milligan**

If you ask people which flower they associate with the spring many will say either the snowdrop or the daffodil. Both are iconic spring flowers and have a rich history in horticulture.

Noel Kingsbury (*Daffodil – The remarkable story of the world's most popular spring flower*, Timber Press, 2013) says that "Daffodils are somehow the quintessential spring flower. The appearance of their distinctive yellow blooms is a sure sign that winter has either ended or is about to soon".

I am sure that we are no different from many gardeners in having a number of these beautiful flowers in our gardens and look forward to their cheerful appearance with a sense of anticipation – perhaps marking the start of the main gardening year.

It should not be unexpected that the daffodil is so popular – it has been

growing in gardens for many years. According to some sources, the Greek philosopher Theophrastus (371-287 BC) listed a number of daffodils in his work *Historia Plantarum* (*Enquiry into Plants*, Trans. A. F. Hort, Loeb Classical Library, 1916).

In the following centuries there is a noticeable mention of daffodils in the writings of the great gardeners of the time, e.g. John Gerarde (1597), John Parkinson (1629) and Philip Miller (mid-18th century). For some reason we had to wait until the 19th century to see an explosion in the popularity of the daffodil as a garden flower and the start of the work of many of the famous 19th century hybridisers.

The Rev. G. H. Engleheart (1848-1923) is often noted as the 'Father of the Modern Daffodil' and was one of many clergymen of the time who had a deep interest in breeding and growing





N. 'Lady Margaret Boscawen'  
(Rev. G.H. Engleheart, 1898)



N. 'Bowles Early Sulphur' (1954)

daffodils, e.g. Rev. S. E. Bourne (*The Book of the Daffodil, Handbooks of Practical Gardening, 1903*) and Rev. J. Jacob (*Daffodils, The Present-Day Gardening Series, 1910*).

Rev. Engleheart raised over 700 varieties and some are still available today. We grow *Narcissus* 'Bath's Flame' a division 3 Y-YYO cultivar and N. 'Lady Margaret Boscawen' a division 2, W-Y cultivar both introduced by Rev. Engleheart in 1913 and 1898 respectively and are in the process of collecting more of his introductions. In the same time period E. A. Bowles had great interest in the daffodil and ended up writing a well-known book (*A Handbook of Narcissus, Martin Hopkinson, 1934*) which is a wonderful source of old cultivars as are the books of Rev. Bourne and Rev. Jacob. We grow N. 'Bowles Early Sulphur' a division 1, Y-Y cultivar introduced in 1954 which will flower in and around Christmas in a sheltered location.

While there were, and are, many English daffodil breeders – some of

whom are mentioned above – Ireland has not been behind the door in producing excellent daffodil cultivars. One of the first women to raise daffodil cultivars was Alice Louisa Lawrenson – we grow her N. 'Lucifer' (1890) and have been able to find another of her introductions, N. 'Vesuvius' (1901) which we hope to have next year.

The list of Irish growers and breeders in considerable and contains such well-known names as Guy L. Wilson (1885–1962), William J. Dunlop (?–1990), J. Lionel Richardson (1890–1961), William Baylor Hartland (1836–1912), and Brian Duncan (1934– ) to mention but a few. When Dr Charles Nelson published his famous book detailing Irish Cultivars (*A Heritage of Beauty, IGPS, 2001*) he was able to list over 2600 cultivars of Irish origin. Since then that list has grown considerably so there is no excuse for everyone not to be growing some Irish cultivars.

We grow a wide range of daffodils including those raised before 1950 (so-called historic cultivars), e.g. N. 'W. P. Milner' (William Backhouse, 1869),

and a mix of Irish and British cultivars including *N.* 'Blarney' (Lionel Richardson, 1935), *N.* 'Portrush' (Guy Wilson, 1947), and we must mention *N.* 'Colleen Bawn' (attributed by some to Baylor Hartland).

And remember, the work on breeding daffodils has not stopped, Dave Hardy (Esker Farm Daffodils) listed their first cultivar, *N.* 'Luna Love' a division 10, Y-Y cultivar in 2023 (bulbocodium hybrids, the beautiful hoop-petticoat daffodils). While it may seem premature, part of the fun of gardening is to plan and look ahead – always enjoying the current season and planning for the next, so it is not too early to get out the catalogues, go online and start searching for some good daffodil cultivars to buy and plant come August and September. ■

**John Gerard** (also **John Gerarde**, 1545–1612) was an English herbalist with a large garden in Holborn, now part of London. His 1,484-page illustrated *Herball, or Generall Historie of Plantes*, first published in 1597, became a popular gardening and herbal book in English in the 17th century. *John Gerard, Gerard's Herbal*, Bracken Books, 1990

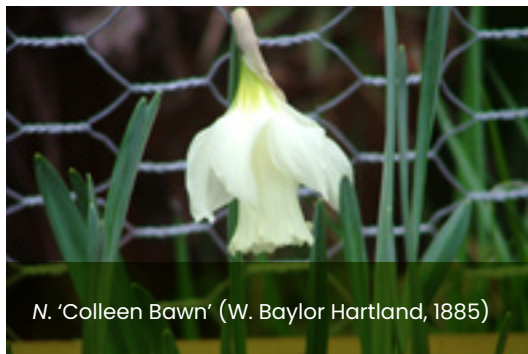
**John Parkinson** (1567–1650) was the last of the great English herbalists and one of the first of the great English botanists. He is known for two monumental works, *Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris* (*Park-in-Sun's Terrestrial Paradise*, 1629), which generally describes the proper cultivation of plants; and *Theatrum Botanicum* (*The Botanical Theatre or Theatre of Plants*, 1640), the most complete and beautifully presented English treatise on plants of its time. *John Parkinson, A Garden of Pleasant Flowers*, Dover, 1976, 1977



*N.* 'Blarney' (J.L. Richardson, 1935)



*N.* 'Portrush' (G.L. Wilson, 1947)



*N.* 'Colleen Bawn' (W. Baylor Hartland, 1885)



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**Darren Reidy**

**G**lobally, 40% of plant species are threatened with extinction. In Ireland, fifteen of our 1047 native and archaeophyte (colonised Ireland pre-1500 AD) species have been declared extinct in the wild. A further 106 species (9%) are threatened with extinction, while 98 species (8%) have undergone such decline that they are considered 'near threatened'. In fact, over half of Ireland's native species

have declined in abundance and range since the year 2000, largely because of habitat loss and degradation by land use change, agricultural intensification, commercial afforestation, excessive nutrient input and the drainage of wetlands. Indeed, 85% of Ireland's protected habitats are considered to be in poor condition. It is widely recognised that radical conservation interventions are required to halt the loss of biodiversity and restore our natural ecosystems. In the face of the global ecological crisis botanic gardens and herbaria are responding by adapting their collections to also ensure the conservation of the global flora. Seed banks are an efficient method of ex-situ plant conservation, capable of conserving floral diversity outside of their natural environments, should it be lost in the wild.

It is the biology and structure of a seed that makes them such ideal candidates for long term ex-situ conservation of wild flora. They consist of an embryonic plant, enclosed in a bundle of nutritive tissue and a protective outer layer. This tiny plant embryo contains all of the genetic information required for a plant to develop, survive and reproduce.

The storage and preservation of seed is not new technology; As long as humans have been harvesting seed for food, they have also been storing them. Farming and domestication of crop plants first emerged between 10-12,000 years ago in the 'Fertile Crescent', but there is evidence indigenous Americans and Australian Aboriginal peoples cultivating plants as far back as 15,000 years before present. Of course, the practise of storing seed to feed your

family and resow emerged around the same time. Simultaneously seed was being buried in tombs of the deceased, across multiple cultures, for their future use in the next life or the afterlife.

But how does seed storage translate to seed conservation? The answer to this comes down to a key survival strategy known as dormancy. Seed dormancy is a temporary suspension of embryo development, allowing seed to survive hostile environmental conditions until suitable conditions return. We are all familiar with the scenes of barren desserts bursting to life after the rains. In some cases, seed can persist in the soil seed bank for decades until germination conditions are right. In other cases embryo suspension is short lived and rely on seed energy reserves rather than becoming truly dormant.

How long exactly can seed survive in this form of suspended animation? Archaeological digs near the Dead Sea have uncovered dried seed of the Judean Date Palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) which were buried over 2000 years ago. After laying dormant for two millennia these seed have successfully been germinated by researchers and cultivated into viable plants. A more extreme example of seed survival comes from Siberia, where seed of the Narrow-leafed Campion (*Silene stenophylla*) was uncovered from a squirrel's burrow which had been frozen in the permafrost for almost 32,000 years. Here, researchers were able to regenerate viable plants from maternal fruit tissues which had remained frozen at -7°C. These two examples illustrate that as long as seed are stored cool and dry they can remain viable for extraordinarily long periods.

The concept of long term seed storage for conservation purposes was developed by Nikolai Vavilov (1887–1943), a botanist, geneticist and crop scientist from Russia. He was heavily influenced by the many repeated famines experienced across the Soviet Union, and believed that the preservation of genetic diversity of crops held the answer food security in the face of environmental perturbations, diseases and climatic events. Under his leadership, the world's first seed bank was established at the Bureau of Applied Botany, Leningrad, Russia, in 1917. He, together with a dedicated team of botanists, amassed some 380,000 collections of seed from the centres of origin of cultivated plants throughout the globe. The faith of world's first seed bank at the hands of the Nazi's during the Siege of Leningrad and the anti-science persecution of Vavilov by Stalin, is a tragic and emotive story which you can read about in detail in the recently published book by Simon Parkin "The Forbidden Garden of Leningrad". Vavilov's legacy and the science of seed conservation has survived however. Today the Global Seed Vault (also known as the Doomsday Vault) in Svalbard, Norway, safeguards over 1,214,827 seed samples from almost every country in the world. This includes Irish deposits made by the Dept. of Agriculture, including some 32 potato varieties. Closer to home the Irish Seed Savers Association does extremely important work in conserving the genetic diversity and heritage varieties of Irish apple trees and other crop plants.

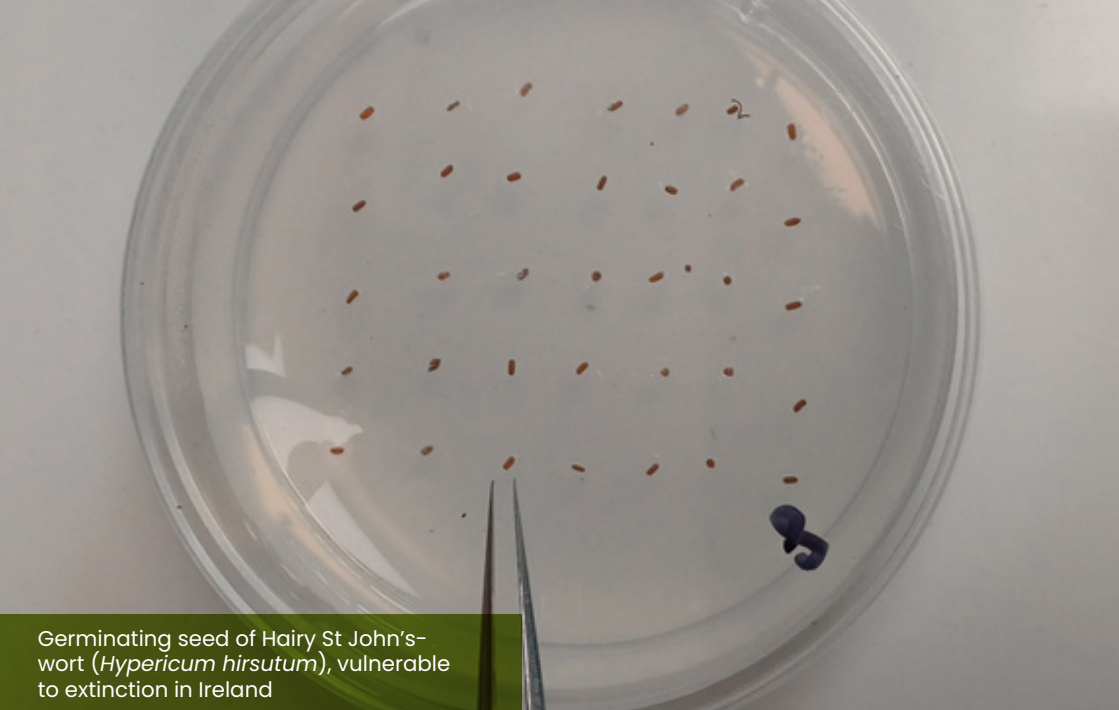
More recently, seed banking techniques have been adapted for the conservation of wild flora. This has



Germination trials

been spearheaded by the Millennium Seed Bank (part of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew), who, through their international partnerships, now house over 2.4 billion seed from around the globe. In Ireland in 2019, the Office of Public Works, in response to the declaration of a 'National Climate and Biodiversity Emergency' committed to the establishment of the National Seed Bank for the conservation of the Irish flora. This has since become a key target with statutory backing under the 'National Biodiversity Action Plan, 2023–2030'. The National Seed Bank is located in the herbarium at the National Botanic Gardens. The facility employs international best practise and aims to bank a collection of seed from all native species. It is currently prioritising those species that are most immediately under threat.





Germinating seed of Hairy St John's-wort (*Hypericum hirsutum*), vulnerable to extinction in Ireland

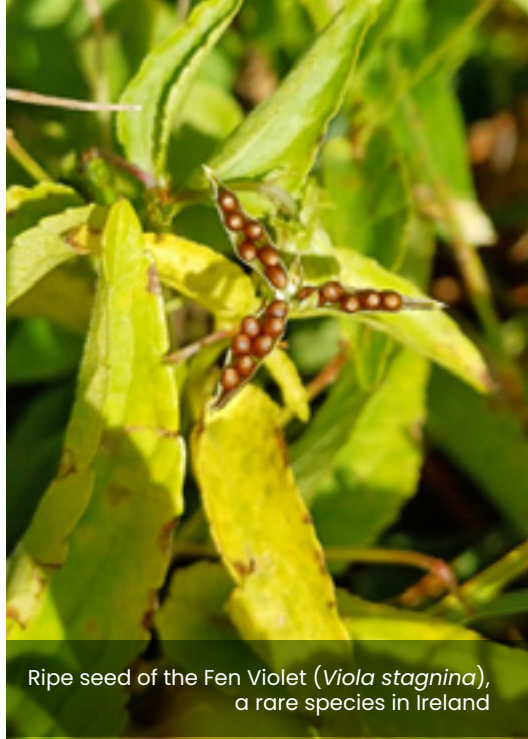
The seed banking process begins with identifying which plant populations may require conservation intervention. This is done in consultation with the National Parks & Wildlife Service. It is important to maximise the genetic diversity of seed collected, as it is this genetic diversity that holds the capacity to adapt to future scenarios and ensure long term survival. This is achieved by sampling populations as widely as possible. The selected populations are assessed to ensure that seed can be safely collected without compromising the population in the wild. It is essential that seed banking does not accelerate a species' extinction. A critical rule is thus that no more than 20% of available seed is collected on any occasion. This threshold is reduced to 10% if a population is particularly vulnerable. Seed is only collected from protected plant species under license from NPWS. Members of the public should be aware

that it is not permitted to interfere with protected plant species or protected habitats unless authorised to do so.

After seed are collected they are returned to the lab. Here they are kept cool and dried to an equilibrated relative humidity of 15%. This is a critical moisture level as it ensures the seed are dry enough to maximise storage potential, but not so dry that the seed is killed. As a general rule, for every 1% relative humidity the moisture content of the seed is reduced, it doubles the lifespan of the seed in storage. Once dry, the seed are cleaned and counted. A portion are then dissected under a microscope to check for fully developed embryos, and the presence of pests or pathogens. A further subset are then rehydrated and germinated to calculate what proportion of the seed are viable. Ideally there would be a target of 10,000 viable seed per banked

species, but this figure can be difficult to achieve for rare or threatened species. The conditions under which seed are germinated can be adjusted to suit the ecological preferences of the species, and sometimes dormancy must be broken in order to accurately calculate viability rates. Any germinated seedlings of species of conservation concern are sent to the native plant nursery to be cultivated as part of the living collection. After establishing viability the remaining dry seed are sealed in foil packets, assigned a unique barcode identifier and frozen at -20°C where they can theoretically survive in perpetuity.

To date the National Seed Bank has preserved seed from >200 populations of 124 different species. This represents 12% of the Irish flora. A quarter of these banked species are red listed, and represent 13% of Ireland's threatened flora. The intent is that, should these species or populations ever be lost from the wild, the seed preserved at the National Seed Bank will be available to assist in the propagation, restoration or reintroduction of populations unique to a given area. Of course, any species reintroduction efforts must follow the removal of the drivers of extinction and be combined with the appropriate habitat restoration measures. This will require a whole of society approach in many cases, with diverse stakeholders such as landowners, local communities, local industries, local authorities, public bodies and NGOs working together to address regional environmental concerns. Until then the National Seed Bank will act as a critical piece of infrastructure and an ark for the survival of some of Ireland's most unique and threatened flora. ■



Ripe seed of the Fen Violet (*Viola stagnina*), a rare species in Ireland

## Seeds, Seeds, Seeds

The seed sowing season is upon us and seed trays, module cells, heat mats and seed packets are stacking up in potting sheds across the land.

### Three seed sowing tips:

**Wait:** sow seeds too early and you risk overload on the pricking bench and traffic jams in the greenhouse.

**Water:** not too much and not too little. Just like Goldilocks.

**Compost:** light and airy for those baby roots. There's a reason we pay for commercial seed sowing mixes.

### And where to buy those all-important seeds? We have a few suggestions.

- Seedaholic: the clue is in the name. An extensive range of flower and vegetable seeds online. Seedaholic.com
- Seeds Ireland sell organic, open-

pollinated, non-GMO flower and vegetable seed from their base in Limerick. [Seedsireland.ie](http://Seedsireland.ie)

- Irish Seed Savers is a social enterprise network of seed and apple tree growers based outside Scariff, Co Clare. [Irishseedsavers.ie](http://Irishseedsavers.ie)
- Jungle Seeds in the UK have been supplying jungle style/tropical seeds to enthusiasts for over 25 years. [Jungleseeds.co.uk](http://Jungleseeds.co.uk)
- Chiltern Seeds is a family business with a wide range including some unusual seeds. [Chilternseeds.co.uk](http://Chilternseeds.co.uk)

**Our last tip:** label everything. You think you'll know which lot thrived and which failed. You won't. Write those labels and stick them into the compost. You'll thank us in mid-May.  
Good luck!

Wait for the warmth and wait for the light. Tender plants cannot handle frost. Put them out too soon and they will sulk. What is the last frost date for your locality. Ask Google.

Hardy plants need to go out the minute the weather warms. Don't pamper them. March and April are perfect time for sowing seeds in Ireland. Light: many seeds require light to germinate. Only add the lightest dusting of compost on top. Direct into soil, make sure that the soil is warm enough.

Drainage is vital for germination and growth of seeds. Getting seeds to germinate is the tricky bit. Warmth is vital. Some seeds will sprout in cool conditions. If your seeds are not sprouting, it might be the temperature of the compost or even the soil. Plenty of air around their roots.

Look at the particle size of the compost. That's what seed compost is. Sieve all-purpose compost. Firm the compost

before planting seeds to improve contact with compost. Most seeds only require a light covering of soil. Klasmann Organic seed compost: a light, airy mix.

Seeds are often killed by too much moisture rather than too little.

Consistent humidity is vital. Keep an eye on germinating seeds. Too much water can cause seeds to rot. Even in a greenhouse, a cold night can stop germination. With very small seeds – lettuce is an example – start off on top of compost in seed tray with drainage holes. Lightly water to ensure the seed makes contact with the compost. Cover with glass or poly. Start off in house. Prick out into Module cells.

Sowing into module direct: use for medium size seed (you can hand count 5/6 seeds to each cell) and bigger seeds (1/2 seeds to each cell). For module planting good drainage is essential. For a lot of seedlings you often get a better result starting out in a smaller space.

Label what you sow: Plant name & sowing date. Fine tune your timings for next year and know what is in that tray. Patience: check the expected germination time.

Do I have the space and time to care for the full packet of seeds all sown together? Do I need all these plants. If the answer is no, use part of a packet.

Slugs, mice, birds & ants love freshly sown seeds. Using a propagator: sterilize the compost before you use it.

First important point: source good seed. Seeds don't last forever. Store them (or buy them from) in a cool, dark environment. Sweet pea benefit from soaking overnight. Check the seed requirements on the back of the pack before you start. Don't bury them too deep.



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Chequerboard lawn

# RHSI Bellefield

**Progress and Plans  
for 2025 and beyond**

**Paul Smyth**

**T**he last 2 years has seen the garden at RHSI Bellefield undergo some gentle restoration, mainly of the borders and the original planting which was the brainchild of Angela Jupe.

Year one was a battle with weeds where we realised the extent of the various problems we had. Year two has been getting on top of those problems





Orchids naturalising in the meadows

as much as possible. This will be ongoing as in any garden, but as I write this is in early 2025 I feel like we have gained some control of the once semi wild garden and the results are starting to show.

Unfortunately we have all the usually suspects: ground elder, bindweed, scutch grass, vetch and marestail as well as a few thousand dandelions and other less pernicious but equally annoying weeds!

As with any garden the first step is to stop the problem from spreading, so where possible we have prevented these problems weeds from seeding, next we've dug out lots of the worst of the problem areas and finally our secret weapon is mulch. We buy in bulk from ENRICH in Co Meath as their compost is sterile and we need a lot! Ideally

we would be producing all compost in house, but we need to tackle this elephant one bite at a time!

The large blue border is currently undergoing weeding and mulching while also use cardboard in areas which paths go through. We take the large weeds out, lay two layers of cardboard and then apply mulch heavily. This has worked really well in a few areas.

The other major change in the walled garden is the major pruning work we've done on the walls. It's very exciting as this summer we'll look forward to discovering lots more Clematis and other smaller climbers that the thugs had buried. Rambling roses and other climbers on nearly every wall have been hard pruned. The walls were all planted here originally, but unfortunately very few of the fruit



trees have been trained, so some restorative pruning should get them into shape.

The north border had a new walk added with some woodland treasures in 2023 and the borders by the entrance have been replanted. At the start of 2025 we hope to replant the Iris beds and the Folly bed, as well as adding lots of new perennials and annuals to the blue border.

The no dig veg garden was also created in 2024 to showcase the idea and to bring an underutilised area of the garden into production. This year we hope to extend the vegetable garden and create some stock beds beside it. The old vegetable garden has become a cut flower garden, which has proved very useful in the house for guests!

The old top lawn has now become our daffodil lawn. In 2023 Esker Farm Daffodils kindly donated thousands of daffodils to this project. Spare *Buxus* were added to create some structure in the lawn. This year we've added snowdrops and can't wait to see the daffodils bloom! We've also created a tulip and crocus lawn, which we will add to in the coming years

Some borders have had no intervention yet, the red border, or Tommy's border as I like to call it, in the lower garden hasn't been touched, but it performs well for now and until we are have the energy to renovate it we will enjoy it!

Outside the walled garden we have added wildflower and annual meadow experiments in the old haggard. The front meadow had lots of orchid seed



No dig vegetable garden before



No dig vegetable garden after

added and we've been delighted to see the spotted orchids spread and thrive. We counted 9 Bee orchids on the site last year, up from 3 the year before and 1 the year before that

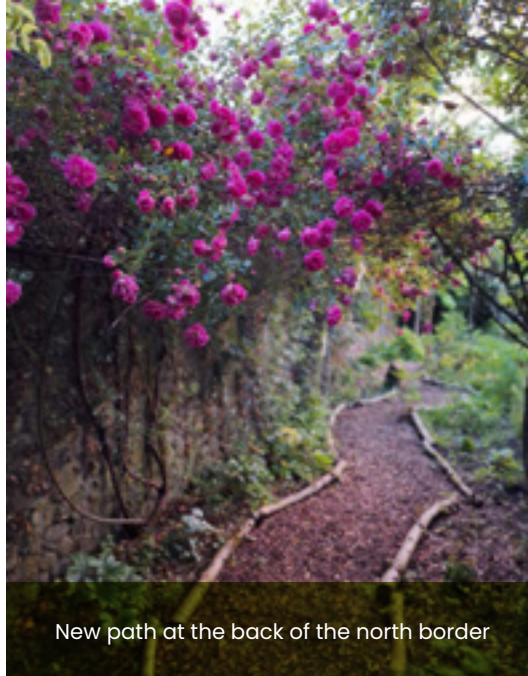
In the woodland we have thinned out many trees and re-surfaced the paths with bark. We had a few ash trees with dieback removed and the monkey puzzle has also been cut back. Unfortunately, our beautiful old copper beech by the courtyard had to come down in July 2024, a sad but necessary task. We have planted 3 rambling roses to cover the remaining skeleton, among them 'Pauls Himalayan Musk'.

Autumn 2024 saw us build a small carpark for visitors, which also gave opportunity to add a new woodland border. We will fill the remaining areas around the carpark with annual meadow flowers for this season and make more permanent plans in the future

### **Buy into Bellefield**

We hope to start on the woodland extension this spring. We are taking a section of the field beside the current woodland garden to add more trees and to create a new pathway linking the woodland to the lower yard and ultimately the walled garden! We'll be inviting members to 'Buy into Bellefield' by sponsoring a tree - keep an eye on the RHSI website for details in the near future.

Outside of the physical garden development we plan to start offering more practical courses in the garden. Starting with our soil day in March. We hope to offer both a pruning and



New path at the back of the north border

meadow workshop this year too, with more in the pipeline for the future.

We have a great team working behind the scenes applying for grants from the Just Transition Fund, with the hope to develop Bellefield as a visitor attraction, add more walking routes, make the garden more accessible and to have better facilities for a permanent coffee shop and gift shop on site too. We're currently waiting to hear more news about our grant application.

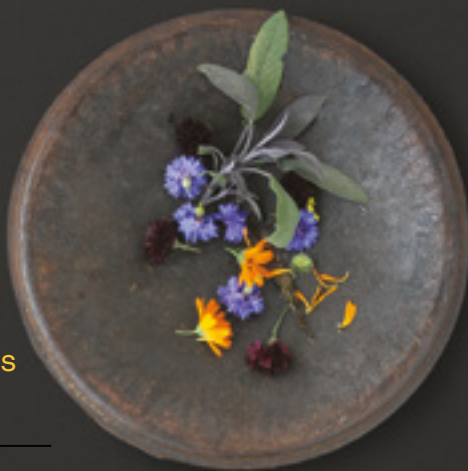
Very little of this would be possible without our fantastic volunteers who work tirelessly here every week both in the garden and behind the scenes. We are a volunteer lead organisation and it's great to see so many great people involved in and investing their time in this exciting project. If you'd like to help us by volunteering, offering your skills or with financial input, please get in touch, we'd love to hear from you. ■

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# Floral Art

**Karen Robinson**

## **Bowl of Beauty**

### ***Requirements:***

A low dish approx. 9" diameter

Wire wreath ring 10" (to rest on top of dish)

Wool or Jute

Cardboard Circle approx. 5" diameter with a 2" hole in the centre

½ block of floral foam

Tulips

Short pieces of foliage

I used Viburnum Tinus and Conifer

**Method:**

- Wrap Wool or jute around Wreath Ring
  - Cut out a circle from the cardboard, wrap with the wool or jute
  - Place the large ring resting on the top of the dish/bowl
  - Place floral foam in the centre of the bowl/dish.
  - Use a mossing pin to hold the smaller ring in the centre of the foam
- Place Tulips throughout the design; keep short, low to the foam, as tulips continue to grow.
  - Place pieces of foliage and viburnum tinus in between the tulips and slightly falling over the edge of the large wool circle.

Enjoy ?



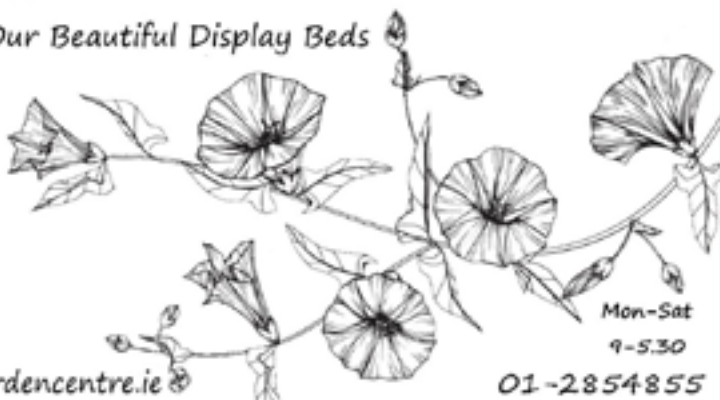


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# RHSI Partner Gardens Scheme

## Benefits To Members 2025

The RHSI Partner Garden Scheme is now in its 11th year with 61 superb participating gardens widely spread throughout the island of Ireland. These gardens vary greatly in size and design, whether surrounding a very grand castle or a lovely rural cottage. What all have in common is a high standard of design, planting and maintenance and the desire of their very generous owners to share their surroundings with other garden lovers.

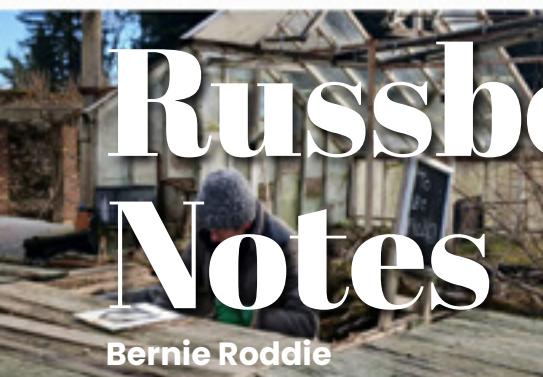
In the past year we have welcomed five terrific new Partner Gardens from all corners of the island. Caher Bridge Gardens in Co Clare, Drimbawn Garden in Co Mayo, Hillsborough Castle and Gardens in Co Down, Mount Congreve Gardens in Co Waterford and Douentza Garden in Co Wexford.

The scheme remains one of the most attractive features of RHSI membership with free or half price entry to these

gardens offered by their owners. Thus your annual RHSI subscription will quickly cover several garden visits each year. Many of the participating gardens offer additional features such as plant sales, cafes or gift shops and we strongly encourage you to support these where available as they in turn support the owners in the running of their gardens.

Full information is available on the Partner Garden section of the RHSI website including visiting times, addresses, post codes, a map and a county by county listing. This makes planning ahead to visit several gardens in an area very easy. The VISIT link with each garden entry brings you to their own website (where available). ■

**It is essential to advance check the garden visiting arrangements and to have your current RHSI membership card with you to avail of free or reduced entry.**



Spring is on the way with the arrival of the snowdrops, aconites, crocuses and daffodils and what a welcome sight they are too. January and February are the months where we did a lot of tidying up, the tool shed and potting shed were given a makeover, skips were ordered to clear rubbish and then we got down to the proper gardening jobs of cutting back, pruning

the fruit bushes and adding compost, and sowing lots and lots of seeds .

Large pots of tulips were dotted around on paths and in the beds to provide early riot of colour for our visitors to the garden. New additions of dahlia tubers have been selected to add to the dahlia bed. The roses in the rose beds were pruned and mulched.





The volunteers have been very busy working on the new Urban Garden which will give our visitors some ideas for landscaping and planting a smaller garden. The lawn is growing well, the paving slabs and stepping stones for the patio area have been selected and are ready to be laid before the plan for planting is worked on and hopefully it should be ready to view by early summer and we look forward to seeing the final outcome.

We are all looking forward to another enjoyable season of gardening and getting ready for the Russborough Show on Sunday 18th May 2025. ■







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Pond move from centre beds to east border

# Laurelmere Cottage Garden

Cherry Sleeman

**R**eturning to the garden in February, we found it in good order, apart from some trees having been felled by the winter storms. These are now being attended to by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, County Council.

A new year, full of promise with crocus, iris and daffodils appearing and 18 of our 25 volunteers ready for action on a cold day.

A new year too, full of change, the volunteers have been exploring the possibility of becoming a separate

garden association. The garden evolved in response to surrounding the head office with a beautiful garden instead of brambles. The RHSI has supported the garden development over the last eight years and, after discussion, feel it is time to make changes that will ensure the future of the garden.

Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown, County Council are keen for us to continue. We have been offered the opportunity to operate under their licence as a separate garden group. Now we are seeking to secure additional funding and insurance.





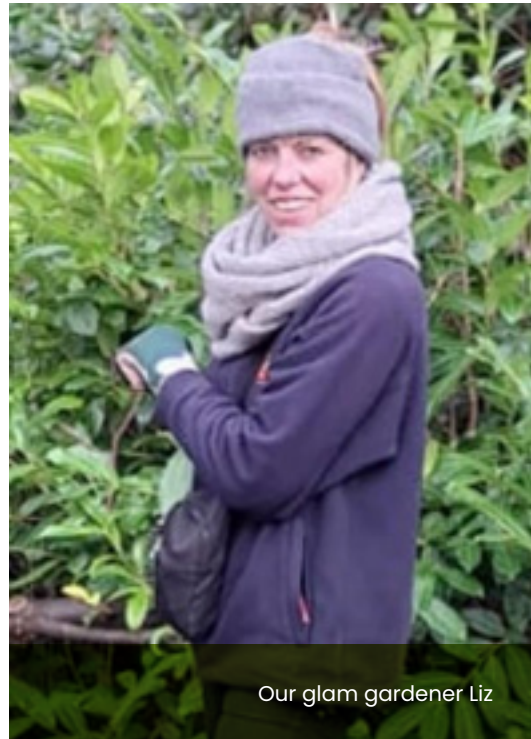
Constance on her knees



Moving hellebores to facilitate emergency exit

The following aspects are being considered by us.

1. Permission has been given for the placement of a large potting shed on the west side of the cottage. Support will be provided by DLR in seeking grant aid in the Autumn to purchase the structure. Latterly, having no shelter has been a real issue for the group.
2. DLR will provide mature trees and ground cover to ameliorate the storm damage which we will care for.
3. We have been asked to make changes in the layout of the garden to facilitate a 5 m grass corridor leading to the left rear of the garden. Good -bye to the wild flower centre bed where stumps will be removed.
4. A temporary bridge will be constructed as an emergency exit, for the duration of the concerts.
5. The provision of estate fencing to partially surround the garden has been ordered.



Our glam gardener Liz

6. Permission has been granted for us to sell plants at the Marlay market bi-annually to help with funds.

We wish to thank RHSI for their support over the last years of the garden in Laurelmere. ■



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# The Kitchen Garden in Spring

Wendy Nairn

**A**s spring approaches, it's time to plan for a productive vegetable garden. Here are some key considerations to guide your choices.

## Choosing What to Grow

Start by considering your favourite vegetables. What do you enjoy eating the most? Next, think about the space and time you have available. Some vegetables offer excellent “value-for-space,” such as leeks, lettuce, and Asian salads. Others, like courgettes, dwarf French beans, and leeks, are costly to buy but easy to grow. Finally, certain vegetables, like sweet corn, lettuce, salads, and peas, are best picked fresh and deteriorate quickly once harvested. Keeping these factors in mind will help you make informed decisions, ensuring



Onion seedlings



Lettuce

a garden filled with the most delicious and nutritious produce.

### Prioritising Soil Health

Healthy soil is the foundation of a thriving garden. At a recent RHSI talk, Conall O Caoimh emphasised soil protection. I always aim to cover the soil with plants or compost to maintain its structure, avoiding unnecessary digging. For new ‘no-dig’ beds, I first remove perennial weeds, but after that, I disturb the soil as little as possible. Less digging means fewer weed seeds are brought to the surface. Consistently removing young weeds prevents them from becoming a problem over time. If your beds are already weedy, try clearing them a few weeks before sowing. This allows weed seeds to germinate and be gently hoed off before planting, a method known as a stale seedbed. It’s particularly useful for slow-germinating crops like carrots and parsnips. Staggered planting in beds maximizes space, and in no-dig systems, plants can be spaced closer than seed packets suggest.

Regularly adding compost encourages soil life, with tiny organisms and earthworms incorporating organic matter naturally. No matter your

soil type, organic matter improves it – helping to aerate heavy clay soils and retain moisture in sandy soils. Mulching paths with woodchip or similar materials reduces weeding. In my garden, beds are about one meter wide and five meters long, with 50-centimeter-wide paths for easy access without straining.

### Sowing Seeds

Timing is key for successful seed germination. Warmth and light are essential for young plants, so it’s often better to wait before sowing. Hardy vegetables catch up later, while heat-loving crops like tomatoes, peppers, and aubergines benefit from an early start. My tomatoes thrive with a mid-March sowing.

I start nearly all seeds in module trays—except for carrots and parsnips—to ensure healthy transplants with minimal root disturbance. This method also helps me track plant numbers. I prefer Klasman organic peat-free compost and durable module trays that have lasted for years. Deep trays work best for peas and beans, which need deep roots. If you’re growing on a smaller scale, recycled containers such as bedding plant trays, toilet roll



centres, and plastic tubs with drainage holes work well.

Before planting out, always harden off seedlings—especially tender crops like courgettes—as late spring frosts can still occur. Growing in modules also allows for continuous planting. For example, after early potatoes, I transplant leeks or purple sprouting broccoli. When planting winter cabbage and broccoli, I interplant lettuce or Asian salads to protect the soil and maximize space.

Carrots and parsnips need to develop their roots quickly, so I avoid starting them in modules. Instead, I pre-sprout parsnip seeds on damp kitchen towel in a lidded box in a cool room (usually from late March to late April). Once a tiny root appears, I carefully sow them in the garden, two seeds per station, spaced 15 cm apart in rows 25 cm apart. If both seeds germinate, I thin them to one per station.

## Crop Rotation

In small gardens, full crop rotation can be challenging, but avoiding repeated planting of potatoes or onions in the same soil is essential since they are prone to soil-borne diseases. If space allows, an ideal system includes four or eight deep beds, rotating crops annually. The eight primary vegetable families are:

Brassicacae, Leguminales, Cucurbitales, Alliaceae, Beets, Umbelliferae, Solanaceae and Lettuceae.

It is important to become familiar with which vegetables belong to which family and the needs of that vegetable



in regard to soil nutrients, pH and any common diseases.

With eight beds, you can plant each family in a different bed each year, completing a full rotation every eight years. Alternatively, a four-bed system, each divided in half, works well in smaller spaces.

At first, planning rotations may seem complicated, but with experience, it becomes second nature. If you're looking for further reading, these books are excellent resources for both beginners and experienced gardeners:

- *Grow Your Own Vegetables* by Joy Larkham – a comprehensive guide.
- *Vegetable Course* by Charles Dowding – excellent insights into no-dig gardening.

Spring is a time of anticipation in the kitchen garden. By planning ahead, caring for your soil, and making smart planting choices, you can enjoy a bountiful harvest throughout the seasons. ■

# Book Review

Peggy Masterson

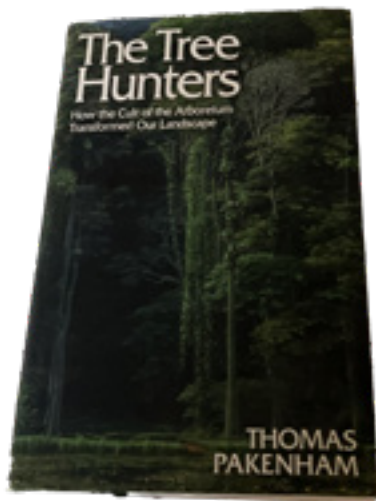
## THE TREE HUNTERS

By Thomas Pakenham

Thomas Pakenham, a renowned author and historian, has written a fascinating book entitled *The Tree Hunters: How the Cult of the Arboretum Transformed Our Landscape* (2024). He traces back to the 1660s to John Tradescant, John Evelyn and others, who were the initiators of a mission to bring back seeds from North America. The great age of tree hunters was the next two centuries. Between 1700 and the 1920s plant hunters ranged the world from Alaska to Patagonia, and from South Africa, China and Japan, seeking trees new to European markets. It was these heroic hunters who transformed our landscape.

Thomas Pakenham is a historian, and a great storyteller. He goes behind the adventures, mishaps and successes of the amazing individuals who established the first arboretums. He reveals the marvellous tales of adventures, discoveries and the passions of the 'Scholars and Daredevils' who combed the new and old worlds in search of green treasure. The early 19th century bought an explosion of activity and an increase in the number of arboretums.

At that time there was a growth in the number of plant nurseries who competed to acquire new plants.



Nursery owners sponsored and paid many of the various collectors. Joseph Hooker went to Sikkim and the Himalayas and was responsible for many of the great rhododendrons which grace our gardens. William Lobb went to Argentina and Chile. Robert Fortune went to China; his introductions of numerous ornamental plants feature in our gardens today. Ernest Wilson introduced great Magnolias from China. Many of our plants bear the names of these great collectors.

Like all Thomas Pakenham's books, *The Tree Hunters* is beautifully written and researched, and is a hugely enjoyable read. A must for garden enthusiasts.

*The Tree Hunters: how the cult of the arboretum transformed our landscape*, Thomas Pakenham, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2024. ■

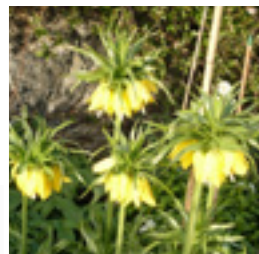
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# Ardgillan Castle, Gardens & Demesne



Ardgillan consists of a 194-acre park, 8 acres of gardens including a wide variety of spring flowering shrubs and spring bulbs, rose garden, national collection of Potentilla, herbaceous border, a walled garden containing extensive collections of herbs fruit vegetables ornamental plants, peonies and irises, and 90 acres of wildflower meadows.

**At the Castle itself, there are Castle Tours, Craft Shop, Art Gallery, Tea Rooms and Playground, Fairy Tree Trail and Wild Flower Meadows.**

Ardgillan Castle Gardens & Demesne,  
Balbriggan, Co Dublin

**Exit 5 or 6 – off M1**

[ardgillancastle.ie](http://ardgillancastle.ie)

T: 01 8492 212  
E: [eventardgillan@fingal.ie](mailto:eventardgillan@fingal.ie)



# THE NATIONAL BOTANIC GARDENS OF IRELAND GLASNEVIN AND KILMACURRAGH



The National Botanic Gardens of Ireland are an oasis of calm and beauty, and entry is free. A premier scientific institution, the Gardens contain important collections of plant species and cultivars from all over the world.

The National Botanic Gardens in Dublin is located in Glasnevin, just three kilometres from Dublin City Centre, and is famous for the exquisitely restored historic glasshouses.

The National Botanic Gardens in Wicklow is located in Kilmacurragh, where the milder climate, higher rainfall, and deeper, acidic soils of this historic Wicklow garden provide a counterpoint to the collections at Glasnevin. The two Gardens have been closely associated since 1854.

The National Botanic Gardens are open every day in both Glasnevin and Kilmacurragh, and are free to enter and explore.

Guided tours are provided daily at Glasnevin and seasonally at Kilmacurragh.



For more information see  
**[www.botanicgardens.ie](http://www.botanicgardens.ie)**

or our social media pages.

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