

PHOTOGRAPHS SEAMUS O DONNELL AND SEÁN Ó GAOITHÍN

A man wearing a bright yellow t-shirt, a grey bucket hat with a white band, and light-colored trousers is crouching on a gravel path. He is looking down intently at a patch of vibrant green moss growing on the ground. His hands are positioned near the moss, as if he is examining it closely. The background shows a gravel path and some sparse vegetation.

EXOTIC MEADOWS

Seán Ó Gaoithín visits a remarkable garden in the heart of the Donegal Gaeltacht





		OPPOSITE 1. Evening light 2. Block and glass globe sculpture 3. Ceramic by Cristy Keeney 4. Sculpture in a sea of grass 5. A border in the nursery 6. Path into garden 7. <i>Musa basjoo</i> 8. Dramatic leaves of <i>Ensete ventricosum</i>

For a Donegal man, Seamus O'Donnell has exotic flair. But perhaps we should not be so surprised. After all, the O'Donnell chieftains of Donegal were well known in the 15th and 16th centuries for their taste for the rich silk fabrics that they imported from Europe. At the time, aristocratic men expressed themselves by wearing vibrant colours and fantastic costumes. That flamboyant gene of the chieftains is evident in Seamus's exotic horticultural tendencies at his Cluain na dTor Nursery Gardens. He has established a remarkable nursery and plant collector's garden on the edge of the town of Falcarragh, on the north Donegal coast.

Seamus, who studied botany at University College Galway, travelled extensively after graduation in 1984, visiting Indonesia, including the island of Bali, Central America, New Zealand and Australia. The plants he saw in his travels instilled in him a love of lush tropical vegetation and an ambition to grow some of them at home.

When he returned to his native Donegal in 1992, he established a nursery on the family farm at Falcarragh, an Irish-speaking region set in beautiful scenery in the north-west of the county. His grandfather, Dennis O'Donnell, had returned home from the Yukon Gold Rush in Alaska in the 1930s. He bought the farm, built a fine two-storey house, and saw to it that his children received the best education possible. His son (Seamus's father), Daniel, was chief agricultural officer in the Department



Seán Ó Gaoithín

of Agriculture. As a boy, Seamus recalls being impressed by his father's knowledge of the names of all the grasses in the meadows of Donegal and, in turn, he decided that when he grew up he would be a gardener.

He started on a green-field site and set about establishing shelter in the field boundaries of his new nursery. He propagated hedging plants from cuttings and used species such as *Escallonia*, *Olearia*, *Salix*, *Griselinia* and *Hebe* – all of which are especially useful for wind-break planting. From those early days of growing hedging plants, Seamus progressed to propagating and acquiring many other plants and he now presides over an interesting nursery stocked with a wide selection of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. He has a special feel for hebes and, over the past 15 years, he has grown and propagated more than 80 species and varieties. The nursery's name, Cluain na dTor, translates from the Irish as "the meadow of the shrubs".

There are now several plant specialities at Cluain na dTor. After many years of trial and error Seamus has selected special plant groups for his nursery. The flowering olearias, Spanish brooms and *Ozothamnus* are all well suited to exposed windy locations by the sea, and plants such as *Agapanthus* and *Sedum* complement such plantings.

The nursery has an extensive and interesting selection of grasses – useful in all kinds of soils and situations. Grasses are versatile plants in that they bring movement into the

ABOVE LEFT A colourful section of the nursery

ABOVE RIGHT *Geranium maderense* and *Dicksonia antarctica*

OPENING PAGE Seamus tends to *Scleranthus biflorus*



garden – they will shimmer in the gentlest breeze – and they hold their shape and colour well into the winter. Some of Seamus’s favourites include some tussock forming grasses from New Zealand – *Chionochloa conspicua* ‘Rubra’ with a dark brown or russet look and *Chionochloa flavescens*, a plant that looks like a miniature pampas grass. *Stipa* ‘Pony Tails’ offers delicate texture and movement for mass planting and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* ‘Karl Foerster’ is especially good for winter interest. *Libertia formosa* is a good plant for very exposed locations.

In 2007 Seamus opened his private garden, which is adjacent to the nursery, as part of the Donegal Garden Trail. Surrounded by an established shelter belt of sycamore, ash and elm, the main garden is more akin to a clearing in a jungle rather than what visitors might expect to see in a Donegal garden. The planting is extraordinary, as Seamus is an avid collector and is constantly introducing new exotics. The planted borders are intensely rich in rare and unusual plants. Specimens from opposite ends of the planet are placed together in interesting associations. Here, Seamus has managed to establish tender species including: *Musa* and *Hedychium*, *Tetrapanax*, *Restio*, *Geranium maderense*, *Dicksonia*, *Canna*, *Aeonium*, *Arbutus*, *Echium candicans* and the very unusual Australian reed, *Baloskion tetraphyllum*.

The strength of the exotic planting comes to the fore when summer progresses into autumn. In 2007 the mild autumn meant that even after leaf fall the lush foliage of tetrapanaxes, bananas, gingers and canna lilies seemed to improve, in total contrast to the native vegetation that was going into dormancy. There tends to be a late growing season in Donegal and Seamus has designed his garden and chosen his plants to take full advantage of this phenomenon.

A trip to Cluain na dTor involves more than a visit to a nursery. The garden itself is spectacular and offers much information about growing plants in a coastal environment and the nursery has a wealth of interest and challenging plants. ■

For contact details, directions to Cluain na dTor and more information on the other 25 gardens open for viewing in Donegal, check out www.donegalgardentrail.com.

		LEFT
		1. Brugmansia sanguinea
		2. Aeonium arboreum 'Zwartkop'
		3. Fuchsia procumbens
		4. Acanthus mollis
		5. Cautleya spicata 'Robusta'
		6. Lobelia laxiflora var. angustifolia
		7. Raindrops on a poppy leaf