

Travelling around the world, Seamus O'Donnell was inspired by the plants he saw in their native habitat.

Fionnuala Fallon visited his Donegal nursery recently and Richard Johnston took the photographs.



## Natives of a distant shore



Bottom left: *Tulbaghia violacea*

**H**igh up along the rugged north-west coastline of Donegal and just outside the seaside village of Falcarragh lies Cluain na Dtor, one of Ireland's best kept horticultural secrets. That this fascinating garden and nursery is still relatively unknown, even in gardening circles, is due in part to its geographical remoteness, and in part to the natural reticence of its owner Seamus O'Donnell. Yet what he's achieved, in extremely challenging climatic conditions, is really quite remarkable. Within a stone's throw of the cruelly exposed Atlantic coastline, he's created a nursery and garden packed with tender rarities and exotic specimen plants that come from all four corners of the world.

Giant bananas and tree ferns, feathery restios and vivid ginger lilies jostle for position with honey myrtles, arisaemas and umbrella trees, all against the distant mountain backdrop of Muckish and Errigal. In a part of the world where the climate often makes it difficult to create any kind of a garden, Seamus O'Donnell has created a particularly wonderful one.

Cluain na Dtor Nurseries is set on about

seven hectares of wet, peaty ground that has been in the O'Donnell family since the 1920s, when Seamus's grandfather, Denis, returned home from the Klondyke gold rush with money in his pockets. He bought the land and built the handsome, two-storey farmhouse that Seamus, his wife Deirdre and their daughter Hannah live in today. Wanderlust must run strongly in the O'Donnell family genes, for after gaining a degree in Botany from Galway University in 1984, his grandson Seamus also set off on his travels to places as far flung as Mexico, Costa Rica and South Africa as well as Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia, before returning to Ireland for good in the late 1980s.

His travels abroad had excited, inspired and informed him horticulturally. "I was fascinated by the fact that everywhere I went, even in extreme climates or very exposed sites, I saw native plants that were, by their nature, suited to those growing conditions and were flourishing. It made me look at gardening in a fresh way," Seamus explains. Yet for someone who's now such a devoted plant collector, his collection began modestly enough. An early fascination with hebes and olearias, two Australasian genera of tough



shrubs that are particularly suitable for coastal gardens, led him to specialist nurseries, as he sought out the rarer species. Trevena Cross Nursery in Cornwall was — and still is — a particular source of inspiration, as were the gardens of Inverewe in the northwest Highlands of Scotland.

After completing a start-your-own-business course, Seamus then took the leap and established Cluain na Dtor in the late 1980s. At first, the nursery specialised only in bare-root, coastal hedging plants. As his interest grew, Seamus started researching, tracking down any reading material he could find on the subject of seaside gardens. Very soon he was hooked, and that early modest collection gradually expanded to include many rare but surprisingly hardy Southern Hemisphere plants, which proved to be remarkably suitable for seaside conditions.

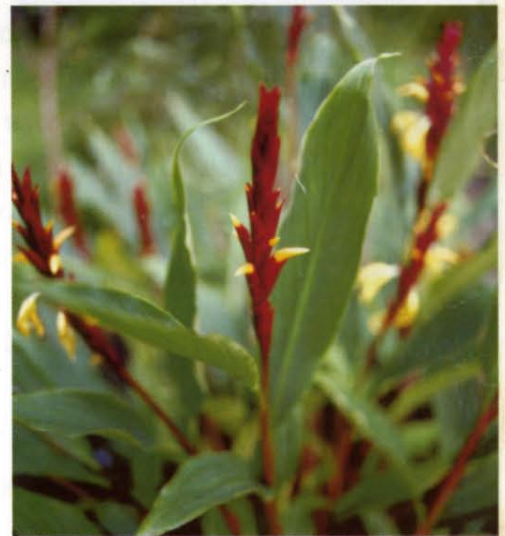
Of course, as Seamus O'Donnell is at pains to point out, there are many different kinds of seaside garden. Along with the busy nursery at Cluain na Dtor, he also runs a garden design business specialising in coastal gardens. "There's a huge difference between the kind of plants that survive the extreme weather conditions regularly experienced along Horn Head and those that thrive in the relatively benign climate of Dublin Bay," he explains. In very exposed sites, he's found that grasses such as *Stipa tenuissima* and *Stipa gigantea*, as well as the handsome New Zealand tussock grass, *Chionochloa rubra*, do particularly well. He also uses *Calamagrostis* and the grasslike New Zealand iris, *Libertia*.

Most euphorbia, hemerocallis and nepeta

species are also usually reliable, as is the evergreen *Metrosideros umbellata*, a tough, evergreen shrub or small tree with deep red flowers in summer. The Australian fuchsia, *Correa backhousiana*, an evergreen shrub with waxy, cream flowers in winter, not a true fuchsia, will also cope with a totally exposed site, as will another stalwart of the coastal garden, the Monterey pine, *Pinus radiata*, which is suitable both as a specimen tree or as hedging.

Seamus has used it with success in the gardens of Renvyle House Hotel in Connemara, which he's in the process of gradually redesigning. More protected coastal gardens, such as a two-hectare private garden in Killiney in County Dublin that Seamus has been working on for a number of years, offer more exotic possibilities and the opportunity for a more experimental planting style. "Aloes, aeoniums, beschornerias, yuccas, puyas, scheffleras ... the kangaroo paw, the Pindo palm, the climbing purple coral pea." As he lists off one rare or exotic plant after another, his eyes gleam with enthusiasm.

But one of Seamus O'Donnell's strengths is that rarity alone doesn't interest him. A gifted garden designer, he has an artist's touch when it comes to exquisite plant combinations. The garden and nursery at Cluain na Dtor are full of flashes of brilliance, such as a giant metal cormorant, sculpted by artist Ewen Berry, which Seamus has underplanted with drifts of the steel-blue grass, *Elymus magellanicus*, the wispy *Stipa* 'Pony Tails' and different species of *Agapanthus*. Close by, the silver-white leaves of *Salix exigua* glimmer in the



Top right: **Eryngium** flowers with *Elymus magellanicus*  
Middle: *Cautleya gracilis*  
Bottom: Close-up of acacia leaf

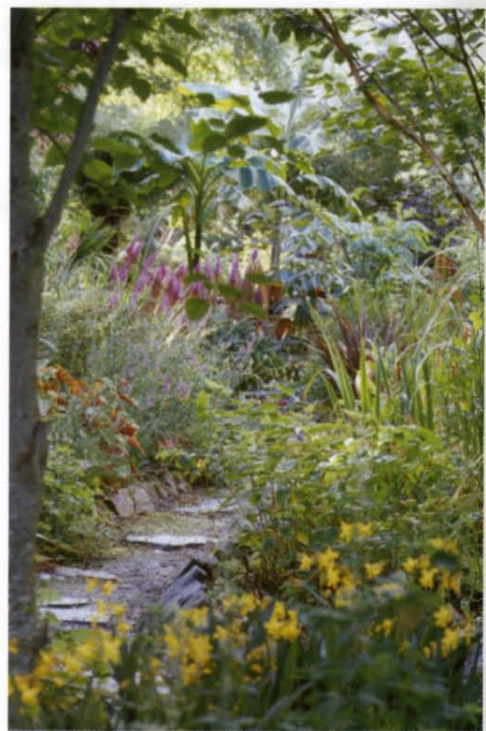
sunshine. His own private garden, which lies near to the house and enjoys the shelter of a line of ancient sycamores, is a shady Aladdin's cave of rare and lovely plants, but skilfully combined to create an exquisite tapestry of flowers and foliage.

A huge natural curiosity and love of experimentation, along with an encyclopaedic knowledge of plants, means that Seamus is always seeking out new or relatively unknown plants, testing them for hardiness and disease resistance and exploring different methods of cultivation. He propagates by seed, cuttings and division, and also sources new varieties by mail order, from nurseries as far away as South Africa.

The five tunnels at Cluain na Dtor are full of choice specimens, including the silk tree, *Albizia lophantha*, the New Zealand wineberry, *Aristotelia serrata*, and the tree fuchsia, *Fuchsia excorticata*, which Seamus grew from seed that he'd personally collected in New Zealand. Another one of his personal favourites is *Leucadendron* 'Safari Sunset' — "because I love the way sunlight hits the leaves," he explains. He's now beginning to experiment with coppicing, where trees and shrubs are cut close to ground level to encourage low, bushy growth rather than a single stem or trunk.

Over two-thirds of the nursery is also being developed as a wildlife garden, with trees and shrubs being planted to create a richly varied habitat for native species. For gardeners, Cluain na Dtor is an inspiring place to visit and a brilliant example of how to overcome the horticultural challenges that an exposed coastal site inevitably presents, while still respecting the natural environment.

That Seamus O'Donnell himself has a deep regard and admiration for the wild landscape is obvious, both in his work and in his words. Before we left, he took us to a steeply curving lane, thickly edged with wildflowers, that led down to the sea. Below us lay Ballyness Bay, and a distant Tory Island. The golden beaches were almost empty of people, and the only sound was the song of a curlew. "Now," he said with a quiet smile, "isn't that something else?" ■



### Contact details

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Tel: 074-9135640/Email: cluainnador@eircom.net  
Opening times: Open all year, Monday to Saturday, 9.30am to 6pm.

Directions: From Letterkenny, take the N56 as far as Falcarragh. The nursery is signposted from here. For those planning a trip to Cluain na Dtor Nurseries and an overnight stay, The Mill Restaurant and guesthouse in nearby Dunfanaghy is very reasonable priced and very highly recommended.

Check out [www.themillrestaurant.com](http://www.themillrestaurant.com) for further details, or phone 074-9136985.

Top: The nursery sales area  
Bottom left: General view of part of nursery  
Bottom right: path through Seamus O'Donnell's garden