



Backed by the sea, this border at Cluain na dTor illustrates the wind- and salt-tolerance of familiar garden plants such as *Agapanthus*, *Erica*, *Hemerocallis* and *Sedum*.



On the edge

In a wild, windy, coastal corner of northwest Ireland is a mild garden where exotic plants proliferate behind shelter belts as if in a jungle clearing

Author: **Helen Dillon**, *The Garden* columnist who tends a sheltered garden in Dublin. Photography: **Andrea Jones**

Cluain na dTor or 'Meadow of Shrubs' is in the heart of the Gaeltacht, the northwest corner of Ireland, where Irish is the first language and traditional music still holds sway.

Nurseryman Seamus O'Donnell attained a degree in botany from University College, Galway, and then travelled extensively round the world studying plants in the wild, particularly in coastal habitats. His mother was 'great at taking the wee slips' (what the Irish call cuttings) and his father was in agriculture, so knew a great deal about grasses and wildflowers. At that time, Donegal gardens were mostly for growing potatoes and cabbages – and perhaps the odd hydrangea.

Seamus and his wife Deirdre live in the house his grandfather built, on almost 7ha (15 acres) of peaty land he



Seamus O'Donnell and Deirdre Brennan with Minnie, by the beach at Falcarragh.

winds that blow across the full width of the North Atlantic, heavy rainfall and poor, boggy, soil.

When Seamus started to garden on this originally barren site in the early 1990s, his first thought was how he could help wildlife. 'When I got here there were no trees,' he says, 'so I had to plant some. Here, our number-one native tree is sessile oak – wonderful value for wildlife – along with willow and birch.' There is now a resident family of long-eared owls because of all his tree planting.

bought on his return from gold mining in the Klondike in the 1930s. It is tucked into the northeast corner of the site, facing south and a 10-minute walk from the sea.

For all its beauty and mild temperatures, northwest Donegal can be an unpromising climate, of rolling mists and sudden squalls,

Providing shelter

A deep shelter belt including rowan, willow, Monterey pines, sycamore and Sitka spruce, underplanted with salt- and wind-tolerant shrubby species such as *Phormium*, *Olearia*, *Hebe* and *Fuchsia*, now runs the full length of the western edge of the site, tempering the worst the Atlantic >>>

The Exotic Garden

An eclectic mix of palms, *Ensete*, phormiums, grasses and salvias jostle for space in the jungle-like Exotic Garden. Close to the house, it enjoys a mild climate protected from gales by robust shelter belts planted more than 20 years ago by the owners.

gales can throw at it. Seamus emphasises how important it is to cut back young trees and shrubs on exposed sites. 'People are reluctant to cut back, but I keep telling them it's essential to prevent wind-rock.'

The whole garden structure is informal, designed for year-round interest. Seamus takes cues from its surroundings: 'I'm very influenced by the landscape – the inlet, the little headland, the mountain. I'm always planting to echo these shapes.'

The garden also includes a retail nursery, with a trio of polytunnels at the centre of the plot, and a sales area to the south. It specialises, of course, in plants adapted to coastal and exposed areas. Seamus also runs a successful garden-design business.

We wandered up the slope from the nursery to the house through an amazing mix of plants, tender and otherwise, in a variety of shapes, forms, textures and many different greens, from tree ferns and restios to a lovely young podocarpus, summed up by my first sight of *Blechnum novae-zelandiae*. Hardy to -8°C (18°F) the fertile fronds of this gorgeous fern can be pure black or brown, in stark contrast to the larger, equally glamorous black-green sterile leaves.

Gardening ethos

How does Seamus keep such perfect balance in the garden? 'It's very much the survival of the fittest,' he says. The grass is strimmed once a year, the paths are mown, but all the plants have to be able to withstand competition with the grass. Nurse



A bed in the nursery sales area with *Sedum Herbstfreude* Group, *Elaeagnus 'Quicksilver'*, an unusual un-named *Gunnera* and *Stipa gigantea*.

Cluain na dTor

Location: Ballyconnell, Falcarragh, Co. Donegal, Republic of Ireland; tel (from UK) 00353 87 626 7599; www.seasideplants.net

Summary: gardens, art studio and nursery specialising in plants for coastal and exposed areas.

Size: 7ha (15 acres), including meadows and woodland not shown on plan.

Soil type: acidic, wet.

Aspect: faces sea to northwest.

Age of garden: about 20 years.

Key season of interest: July to end October.

Open: Monday-Saturday, 10am-5pm. Sundays by appointment.



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trees, native *Betula pubescens* and Sitka spruce, provide the outer shelter belt until everything else is well established. Dense planting gives rapid protection for young plants. Interestingly, the garden has few pest or disease problems, which Seamus attributes to the mixed nature of the plantings, which seems to prevent problems with either building up.

New Zealand plants are especially happy in Ireland, where Atlantic gales compare with the winds of their native climate. We passed *Fuchsia excorticata*, one of only three fuchsias native to New Zealand, which can reach 15m (almost 50ft).

'I really love that plant, year round: it has early flowers in spring, is easy to manage (but not always easy to get going), and the shaggy, peeling bark is just lovely,' says Seamus. When questioned about his favourite myrtle, his answer was '*Ugni molinae* (Chilean guava), and the autumn fruit is just delicious – little red berries, exceptionally sweet and tasting of strawberries'.

Walking back through the nursery took some time: we were distracted this way and that by my asking about plants I didn't recognise. There were lovely examples of *Cordyline indivisa*, infinitely more handsome than *C. australis*, but 'difficult to establish when young', I was advised.

I thought we had arrived at the end of the garden when Seamus opened a gate to a lightly wooded area, leading to what he calls the Wet Meadow and Autumn Garden, planted for late-season interest. Suddenly we came upon a wide, beautiful vista, a gentle, flowing landscape of grass, water and planting so subtle and so akin to the surrounding wild I had to blink to decide where the garden began and the wilderness took over.

I do not think I have ever seen a place that so brilliantly illustrates how a garden can be integrated >>



Elements of the Cluain na dTor style

- 1 Another view of the Exotic Garden showing its reliance on foliage, not flowers. This area includes spiky *Pseudopanax crassifolius*, *Gunnera killipiana* (found in Guatemala by Bleddyn and Sue Wynn Jones), *Persicaria virginiana* var. *filiformis*, bold umbrellas of *Schefflera taiwaniana*, rough tree fern (*Dicksonia antarctica*), *Impatiens tinctoria* and pot-grown *Libertia* (New Zealand iris).
- 2 *Stipa tenuissima* 'waves' with fish sculptures by artist Andrew O'Doherty.
- 3 A spiral labyrinth of native rushes in the Wet Meadow. Similar double spiral designs are carved into stones around the neolithic passage grave of Newgrange, in Co. Meath, dated to 3,200bc.
- 4 By the sales area is a sea of *Stipa tenuissima* with a moon globe by Andrew O'Doherty and a cormorant by Ewen Berry of An Cosan Glás Sculptor Group.
- 5 Backlit, *Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii' glows bronze, matching the flowers and stem sheaths of *Restio tetraphyllus*, a substantial Australian restio.



into a wild, windswept landscape. Highlights include a spiral labyrinth (a motif common in Ireland's prehistory), formed from native rushes, and a circular pond.

The whites of house walls and birch stems seem only to enhance even further the fiery brightness of Boston ivy in autumn.

The nursery

Is there any plant we gardeners want more than one we haven't tried before, and has a reputation of being tender? The Cluain na dTor nursery is full of such temptations, including *Amicia zygomeris*, *Lobelia tupa*, *Mitraria coccinea*, *Acacia pravissima* (the hardiest mimosa, to at least -5°C / 23°F), myrtles, several *Pseudopanax*, including *P.* (*Adiantifolius* Group) 'Adiantifolius' ('an excellent all-year-round architectural plant in shade,' says Seamus). I was delighted to get back my long-lost New Zealand grass *Chionochoa conspicua*, which I'd killed by disturbing it. Rare is the grass that never looks a wreck: this one is lovely for a year, until cut back the following spring.

Should you find yourself in this remote corner of Ireland, especially if you garden on the coast or have to deal with an exposed site, visit the Meadow of Shrubs. It offers a warm welcome, and a masterclass in how to plant in harmony with the surrounding landscape awaits. ●

SEAMUS O'DONNELL'S PLANTING COMBINATIONS



❖ The Exotic Garden thrives thanks to the wind-tempering shelter belts around and within Cluain na dTor. A Chusan palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) is doing well.

❖ Chilean bamboo (*Chusquea culeou*) adds to the lush, jungly effect that dense planting and contrasting leaf size and texture evokes.

❖ The large, bold, blue-purple leaves of banana relative *Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii' add an exotic touch to any garden.

Simple but effective

A large part of the garden's success derives from Seamus's eye for a good planting combination. Here the flat white umbrellas of annual *Ammi visnaga* 'Mystique' contrast beautifully in form and texture with the wispy, fawn flowers of grass *Stipa tenuissima*.



More plant partnerships

Pseudopanax crassifolius (lancewood) from New Zealand has such an unusual shape it can be difficult to integrate into a planting. Here the leaves of *Crocosmia* echo the shape and habit of the lancewood foliage, while vivid red flowers draw the eye away from its odd neighbour.

Inset: *Tropaeolum speciosum* (flame creeper) and *Parthenocissus tricuspidata* (Boston ivy) in blazing autumn conjunction.

