



GARDENING *on the* EDGE

On the far western coast of Ireland, Seamus and Deirdre O'Donnell have amassed a collection of plants from around the world that seem very much at home on the shores of the wild Atlantic

WORDS *Agnes Stevenson* PHOTOGRAPHS *Andrea Jones*



As Seamus and Deirdre O'Donnell follow the path that leads between the dunes to the wide curve of Falcarragh Bay, Minnie the dog runs on ahead. On most days they have this two-mile stretch of pristine white sand entirely to themselves.

'Swim from here and you'd fetch up in Canada,' says Seamus, looking out to the grey surge of the ocean.

Both Seamus and Deirdre are rooted in this wild fringe of Europe, where the land dissolves into the Atlantic in a flurry of salt spray and rainbows. Deirdre grew up here as a member of the famous singing Brennan family. Her sister is Enya, and although she herself is an artist, recently she has been on tour with the family group, Clannad, which this autumn is planning to launch a new album. Seamus is a native of this westernmost edge of Donegal, a place where the wind is a constant presence, sculpting dunes and grassland and creating an almost treeless landscape.

Yet trees do grow here and when we turn our backs to the waves we can see them clustered around a white-washed farmhouse. This is Cluain na dTor, which has been in Seamus's family since his grandfather Denis returned from the Klondike with enough gold to buy 20 acres of land on which he built a house and began to farm the peaty soil. The trees are more recent arrivals. Seamus started planting them in the 1990s and today they shelter five acres of nursery and gardens filled with native species and an exotic collection of plants from around the world. Tropical bananas and tender *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex' fill the clearings. Tree ferns sprouting delicate fronds grow next to Lancewood trees from New Zealand and a young Foxglove tree from China waves giant leaves of a startling, lime green colour.

THE RESILIENCE OF NATURE

The name Cluain na dTor means *Meadow of Shrubs* and while much of the garden does resemble a meadow, other parts are more like a jungle. Yet whether they are native species or have their origins on the other side of the world, what all the plants here have in common is that they are perfectly at home in the wet and

PREVIOUS PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Seamus and Deirdre O'Donnell with their dog Minnie at Falcarragh Beach; a rainbow over the beach; *Pseudopanax crassifolius*, *Ensete maurelii*, *Dicksonia antarctica*, *Schefflera taiwaniana*, *Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola', *Saruma henryi* and *Catalpa bignonioides* THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT A moon artwork by Andrew O'Doherty alongside a cormorant sculpture (An Cosan Glas sculpture group); the couple having a picnic; *Paulownia tomentosa*, *Astelia chathamica*, *Musa basjoo*, *Acca*, *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex' and *Eomecon chionantha* groundcover; the nursery sales area





mild climate of Donegal.

Seamus has spent 20 years testing all sorts of plants for hardiness and reliability and slowly increasing his stock, through seed sowing, cuttings and division, until he has enough to sell in the nursery. And despite his intimate knowledge of the plants that he grows, he still finds that they have the power to surprise him.

'Along with the rest of Ireland and the UK, Donegal has had a succession of very harsh winters but I have been astonished by how well the Restios from South Africa have coped here. It proves that if you can create a suitable micro-climate all sorts of plants can thrive in places that are very different from their native habitats.'

Even though she's an artist and sculptor who works very closely with nature, Deirdre admits she had little knowledge of plants when she married Seamus. In fact, she says: 'I didn't know anything about them when Seamus started the nursery, but now I am in charge of the vegetables.'

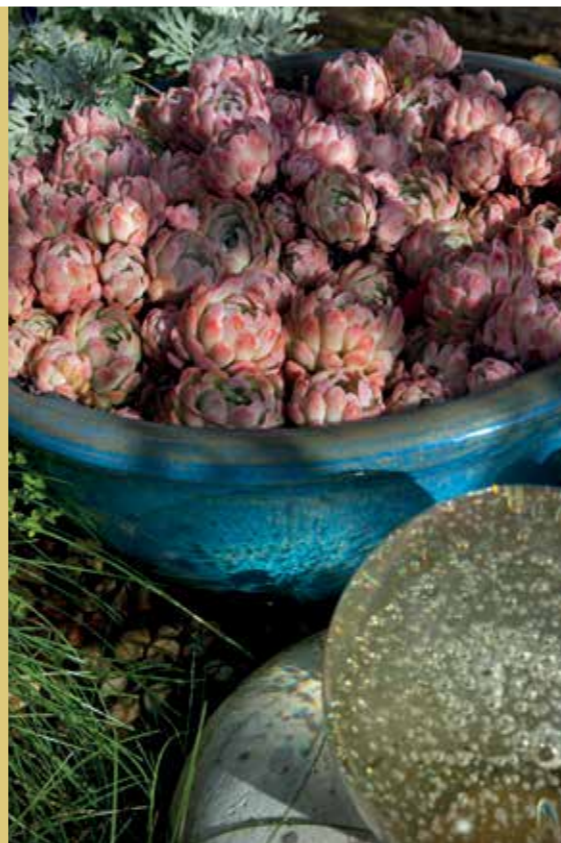
This year she has been juggling duties in the vegetable garden with her singing engagements and her work with the artists' collective, An Cosan Glas, that fills the sand dunes of nearby Magheraroarty Beach with illuminated sculptures.

Seamus on the other hand has always loved plants but it was only after completing his studies in Galway in the 1980s that he embarked on the travels that would influence what he now grows. 'I'd graduated with a degree in botany but was unable to name a single tree,' says Seamus. 'But then I took off for places like South Africa and New Zealand and saw native plants that I was sure could thrive in Ireland.'

His favourites are plants of the littoral that feel most at home in that narrow strip between sea and land where only the most adaptable of living things can survive. 'You can recognise many of them by their thick, shiny leaves and waxy coating,' says Seamus.

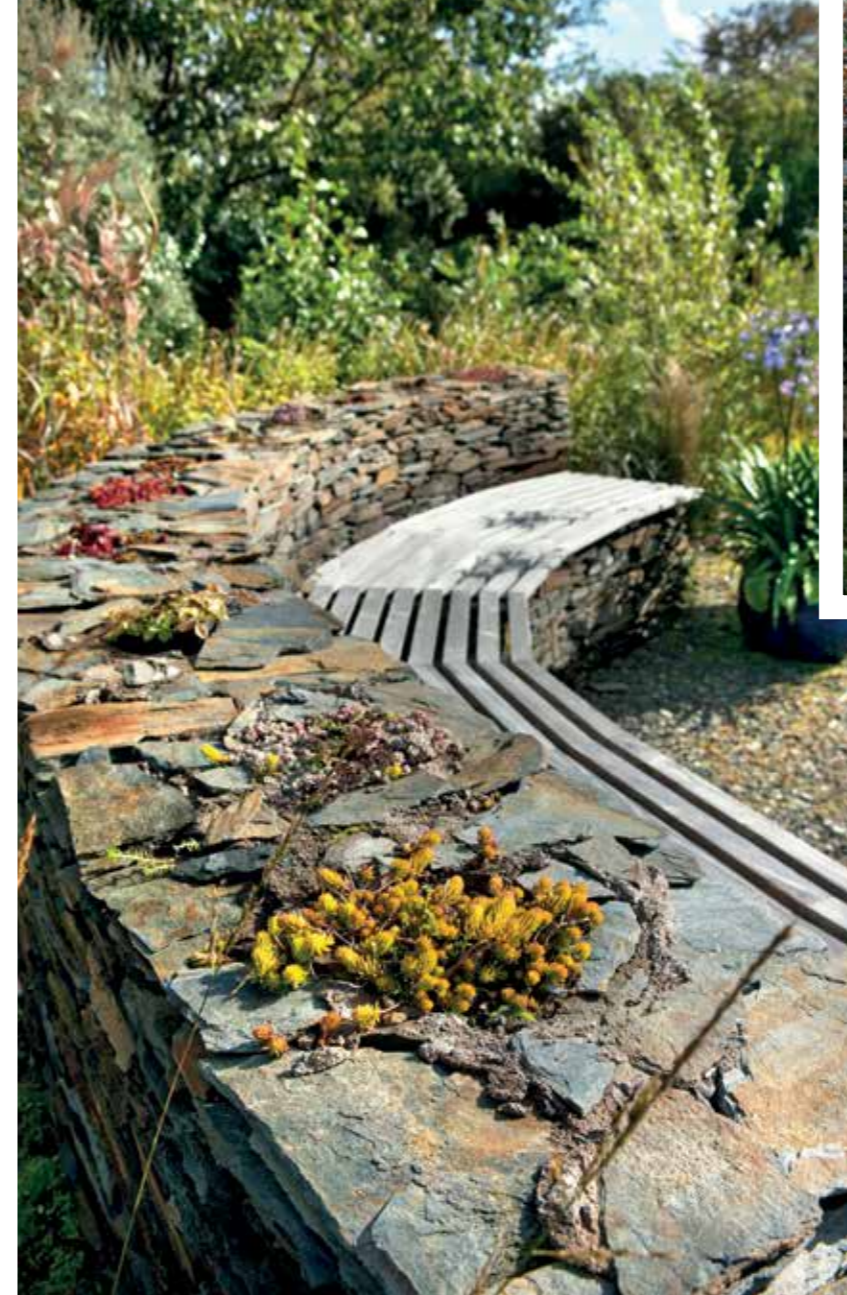
Some, such as Escallonia, and Olearia are suited to the maritime conditions at Falcarragh, and Seamus appreciates the hardiness of grasses and the way in which they move like the sea when stirred by the

THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT *Elaeagnus* 'Quicksilver' with *Sedum spectabile* 'Autumn Joy' ABOVE A spiral maze cut from the rushes that grow in the damp soil. Seamus says: 'The maze was easy to create and is low maintenance' RIGHT A bowl of dusty pink *Echeveria*



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT *Schizostylis* cv; the view from the house over the front garden to the outbuildings; *Tropaeolum speciosum* with *Parthenocissus tricuspidata*; on most days, Seamus and Deirdre have the two-mile stretch of sand near their house entirely to themselves. 'Swim from here and you'd fetch up in Canada,' says Seamus; *Hydrangeas* with *Bupleurum fruticosum* by the outhouses; *Stipa tenuissima* with fish by Andrew O'Doherty; the nursery and art gallery; *Humulus lupulus* 'Aureus' with *Muehlenbeckia complexa* var. *trilobata*





OPPOSITE The woven willow archway, which twists and curves up towards the sky, resembles a pair of upended whale bones THIS, PAGE FROM ABOVE A bench with Sedum cv; a bamboo screening at the entrance to the nursery's polytunnel; Ozothamnus 'Threave Seedling' (sea rosemary)



wind – so much so that amidst a swathe of newly planted *Stipa tenuissima* he's positioned a shoal of metal fish.

THE ART OF GARDENING

These sculptures by Andrew O'Doherty are amongst the many artworks by local artists that appear around the garden, most of them created from natural or reclaimed materials. And Seamus has contributed his own creative touches, with bamboo screening around the polytunnel and a spiral maze cut from the rushes that grow in the damp soil. 'I was cutting the rushes when I realised that I could make a feature of them. The maze was easy to create and is low maintenance.'

And in this garden many simple features such as the curving stone bench with pockets filled with Sedums and a woven willow archway that twists and curves skywards like a pair of upended whale bones, have been elevated to artworks either by ingenuity or by the quality of their craftsmanship.

'Everything I do here is influenced by our proximity to the sea and by a desire to support wildlife,' says Seamus, and indeed when we stand still all we can hear is the wind in the trees and the sound of birdsong. 'We have badgers, foxes and owls and recently I saw my first flock of waxwings.' He attributes the rise in bird numbers to the range of habitats that now exist. 'As well as the trees, I planted a second line of defence against the wind using tough plants such as gorse and *Rosa rugosa* and this helps to provide cover for the birds.'

Meanwhile Seamus is continuing to explore the limits of what will grow, planting stands of Monterey cypress and *Pinus radiata* and now that the windbreak is mature he has begun growing *Acer rubrum* for its vivid autumn colours. He's also recently started work on excavating a large pond. 'It isn't finished but already it is attracting all sorts of creatures and insects, and water adds another important element to the garden.'

For details about Cluain na dTor, visit seasideplants.net.
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