



A wind-shaped Hawthorn: autumn is one of the best times to visit Cluain na dTor, when a magical low sunlight ignites the planting

Sheltering from the storm in Donegal

Ali Rochford
Seamus O'Donnell's garden is an oasis of calm in a windswept county



Exposed, windswept, desolate: just some of the words one might use to describe the farmland that nurseryman Seamus O'Donnell took on some 30 years ago. Determined to create a sheltered haven, he began a massive effort to disable the destructive winds that whip and blast this part of Donegal by planting thousands of trees.

Now, even when storms rage around the surrounding countryside, the heart of the garden is calm and still. "You could have a storm blowing, but in the garden you hardly feel a breath," says O'Donnell as he guides me through the garden, pointing out plants from all corners of the world happily growing in the boggy soil.

O'Donnell, through his own endeavours and observations, has become an expert on coastal gardening and the planting of "shelter-belts". The garden, which he shares with his wife, Deirdre Brennan, an artist and educator, is called Cluain na dTor, Meadow of the Shrubs.

Located close to Falcarragh on the north Donegal coast, the garden has evolved in stages as the trees and shrubs planted became ever more effective sentinels against the wild winds.

Planting shelter is a long game. "You can't garden if you don't have patience," O'Donnell says. And now that the shelter has established, he can grow more or less whatever he wants.



Seamus O'Donnell and Deirdre Brennan



The house at Cluain na dTor near Falcarragh in Donegal

starting in the nursery. It takes in areas of lower intensity planting where nature has more of a hand.

This includes the meadow where wild orchids grow with a view to Tory Island in the distance, to areas of high intensity, mostly ornamental planting, such as the "exotic garden" where cannas and ensete with their large tropical-looking leaves, which would otherwise be shredded by harsh winds, grow happily, unblemished in the stillness.

"The coast can be a nice sheltered garden by the seaside, or a very exposed garden on the west coast," O'Donnell says. "You must do your research."

To create decent shelter, multiple

lines of defence may be required. See which plants are doing well locally as you will need to tailor the planting to the local conditions for the best chance of success. The aim is to filter, not block, the wind.

"The secret is to keep cutting things back on the first line of defence. Some people find it really hard to cut back new hedging, but in the long run, it encourages it to bush out and you get a better root system. I'm constantly doing that, even with trees, I take the tops off them as well and to just push them out a bit."

Bushy plants are less likely to be uprooted in wet windy conditions. It's always best to try to filter the wind rather than to block it with a solid

hedge, which can create problems further into the garden as the wind swirls over the hedge.

Plants should be planted 45cm apart. Keep them cut back initially, so that they bush out and the roots can get a good hold. Hedges should be wider at the base than at the top. See below for a list of suitable plants.

Travel is O'Donnell's main inspiration for the planting in the garden. He is often surprised by what will grow here in our wet conditions, the clincher being the lack of heavy frosts.

He believes autumn is one of the best times to visit Cluain na dTor, when a kaleidoscope of colour is on show and a magical low sunlight ignites the planting. Think Parrotia, Cercidiphyllum, Sorbus and of course grasses, a favourite being Red tussock grass, *Chionochloa rubra*.

"October is the most beautiful month [to visit Cluain na dTor], the light is incredible," O'Donnell says. "I planned the gardens to be of interest for as long as possible throughout the seasons. You have to come up here not worrying about the weather. It's the beautiful light and the colour of the landscape."

While the garden is full of exotic plants, they are concentrated in the 'Exotic Garden' section, where purple-leaved plants contrast with lush greens and every size and shape of leaf imaginable.

Expect to see *Amicia zygomeris*, which folds its leaves neatly in the evening, *Aralias* and *Scheffleras*, *Cautleya spicata*, *Hedychiums*, *Pseudopanax*, *Neopanax*, all manner of ferns, including *Blechnum Nova Zelandiae*, and in the centre, a fountain of the South African *Restios*. When I visit, purple *Astilbe* and orange *crocosmia* provide a wonderfully vibrant colour combination.

Donegal may be subject to regular weather warnings, but in the sanctuary of this special garden you get a break from not only the vagaries of the weather, but the stresses of life itself.

Lessons from Cluain na dTor

Creating shelter

Plant densely and not necessarily in straight lines. Cut back for dense, bushy growth and to encourage strong roots to anchor the plants against the wind. Research what grows successfully locally.



Thousands of trees have been planted to protect the gardens from harsh winds



Ornamental plants thrive in the sheltered boggy soil



The meadow with a view to Tory Island in the distance



A lack of heavy frosts enables a large variety of plants to grow in the garden

Raise the crown to create more growing space

Cut off the lower branches of large shrubs and multi-stemmed trees to give them shape. You can then use the trunks as support to grow climbers. This also creates more planting space around the base of the tree.

Position plants to catch the evening sun

Libertia 'Sundown' is eye-catching in sunshine and red-leaved plants, such as *Cotinus* and *cannas*, positively glow when backlit. Place the plants while still in their pots so you can move them around, observe them and find the best position for them – usually in a westerly aspect of the garden, so as to catch the sun's rays.

Be bold and creative

You don't have to plant or even clip your hedge in a straight line. Experiment with plant combinations, and use space creatively – O'Donnell has plants like *fascicularia*, ferns and air plants growing on the trunk of a *Chusan Palm*. He has also used the native *Rush* to great effect as a spiral in the wet meadow land.

The hardy boys

Among the most wind-tolerant plants are gorse and *oleria* – so many of

which are not used, such as *Olearia 'Talbot de Malahide'*, *Fuchsia* as often seen in the west, *Senecios*, *Rosa rugosa*, *Euonymus*, evergreen oak, alder (which is usually seen as a tree, but you can shape it to keep it as a hedge), *Phormium* (such as 'Emerald Isle' – a more compact variety than the often seen monstrous *Phormium tenax*), *Elaeagnus*, holly, hebe (such as *Hebe franciscana*, which grows on Tory Island where few other shrubs grow), elderberry, privet, *fuchsia* and *ribes* (flowering currant).

In a less exposed area, *Corokia* could make an interesting hedge, or *Viburnum opulus*, or *Pittosporum tobira*. Coastal wind-tolerant trees include alder, sycamore, ash, oak, *Sorbus intermedia* (Swedish whitebeam), which is tougher than Mountain ash, *Prunus avium*, elm, *Viburnum opulus*, spindle and hawthorn.

Two recommended conifers are *Pinus radiata* and *Cupressus macrocarpa*.

O'Donnell is available to draw up planting plans via seasideplants.eu. Follow him on Facebook and Instagram (@cluainnador), and check the website for nursery plant list and garden opening hours.

Follow Ali Rochford on Twitter: @Drumanagh