

Places



Pretty in pink – the Broad Walk at Kilmacurragh Botanic Gardens

10 Love letters to the gardens of Ireland

Shane Fitzsimons and Norrie Lalor list the top natural attractions to visit post-lockdown

It once used to be that the phrase “all talk, no action” was a class of insult. But not today. There’s little action can be taken in level-five lockdown, and we’ve become a world of talkers. Elbows on the table, phone on speaker.

One person I phone a bit is a woman called Norrie Lalor. We usually talk about gardens, but over recent weeks that talk has grown sort of pointedly aimed at spring. The best season.

“I’m 90 now, and this will be the second spring I’ve missed. You’re young,” she tells me (though I’m not), “but I don’t know how many springs I have left.”

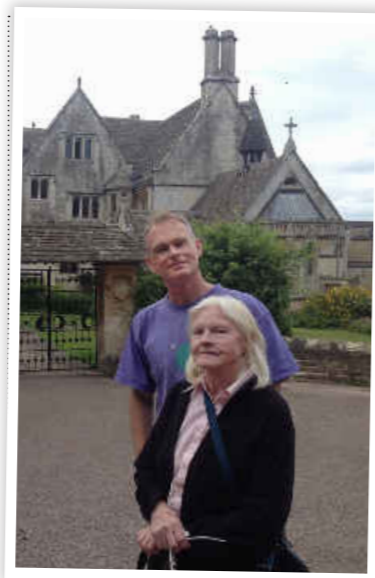
It’s a stark way of looking at nature – though there’s a logic there that I can’t deny, though I try. But Norrie is razor sharp and doesn’t do equivocation. She grew up mostly in Kilkenny, worked in publishing in London in the early 1950s and in the rag trade in New York later that decade. She then returned to Ireland, started a family and grew a garden. She’s also my mother-in-law, and the person who sparked my interest in plants.

Myself and Norrie would have been visiting gardens for a good few years now – and over that time, a few specific plants in a few specific gardens have become the flag-wavers for another turn of the seasons. What they have in common is that they’re all plants of spring.

There’s a patch of meconopsis in Mount Stewart in Co Down, a bluebell walk down near Mullingar, in canal bank Westmeath, and clumps of snowdrops peeking up at Closheen in Rebel Cork.

We love them all, but right now we aren’t allowed to visit. Not because these green retreats are closed but mostly because they’re outside our current travel zone. And so, over late-night phone calls, we found ourselves wondering what was happening in the wonderful gardens of Ireland right now?

God help our lockdown-fogged minds, but I think we wanted to tell the plants we miss them, to remind ourselves of the beauty that’s out there, and ask their planters when they might open. Here’s what we found out...



Family tree – Shane Fitzsimons and mother-in-law Norrie Lalor at Bristol’s Prinknash Abbey

1 Kilmacurragh Botanic Gardens, Co Wicklow

If you’re going to Wicklow, you should nip in to Kilmacurragh and the greatest rhododendrons in Ireland. These plants hail from the Himalayan foothills, and in Wicklow grow to the size of a small house. Right now they will be coming into flower and their blooms will turn the shaded pathways of Kilmacurragh pink and red and white. It’s a spectacular sight.

The gardens are operated by the National Botanic Gardens, but the person casting spells on the ground is head gardener Seamus O’Brien, who has mixed feelings about the lockdown.

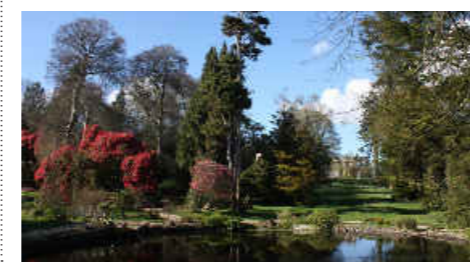
“It’s been tricky,” he admits. “With the 5km limits we’ve just been ticking over, but at the height of last summer it was crazy.

“Last spring we were fully closed for two weeks. No staff, not a sinner around. The silence was eerie. In one way it was great to have the place to myself – there were hawks and kites on the avenue into the gardens, and some long-eared owls nesting and we could hear the chicks.

“Great as that was, we rejoiced when we saw people coming back. And they were so grateful, they’d walk up to us and say ‘thanks for opening.’”

Kilmacurragh is open from 10am until 4.30pm. And there’s takeaway coffee and tea, too.

See botanicgardens.ie/kilmacurragh



2 Hunting Brook, Co Wicklow

Jimi Blake’s garden, Hunting Brook, is probably the brightest star among Irish gardens today. A simply gorgeous garden nestled in the hills of Wicklow, it features a massive range of dramatic plant combinations laid out with exquisite taste.

Even if in normal times you didn’t spend your Sundays visiting gardens, you may have seen Hunting Brook when it featured on the BBC’s *Gardener’s World*. But photos don’t do it justice. This garden makes your heart sing.

“So what does a “new plant guru” (as Jimi Blake has been hailed) do in a lockdown? More gardening, obviously.

“Yes, I turned back towards being the plantsman I used to be, and did less business stuff,” says Jimi. “We extended, and started filming a 12-month online course – a year in the garden.”

He was able to open Hunting Brook last summer, in between the lockdowns.

“And I found myself watching the amount of wildlife in the garden, though now I’m looking forward to travelling to visit other gardens as well.”

Hunting Brook remains closed, and Jimi isn’t sure when it’ll be the right time to open.

“Hopefully in May or June, but I really don’t know.”

See huntingbrook.com



Jimi Blake



Enchanting Mount Stewart

3 Mount Stewart, Co Down

This is a grand, 19th-century house. And the gardens are even grander. Designed and planted by Marchioness Edith Londonderry and head gardener Thomas Bolas in the 1920s, they drew on Irish mythology and European history to create several stunning, interlocked gardens. Apparently, before Edith rolled up her sleeves, the gardens were just lawns, with a few planted pots near the house.

She transformed the place. Horticultural nods to Tír na nÓg, ancient Fomorians, and less ancient Vikings rub shoulders with formal Spanish and Italian influences – though scent and colour are first principles here. History tells us that she wouldn’t plant a rose until it first passed muster as regards the scent. Proper order, Edith.

There’s enchantment behind every tree, and above all I miss what might be the best meconopsis patch in Ireland.

Mount Stewart was the family seat of Lord Castlereagh – Britain’s foreign secretary during the Napoleonic era, a man as much hated as he was feared. “I met murder on the way / He had a mask like Castlereagh,” was how the poet Shelley characterised him. But how did the garden fare under lockdown? Head gardener Oli Johnson tells me it was tough.

“For a start, everyone was on furlough. The garden staff fell from seven to two – and if you remember last year we had a drought, so much of the activity was watering, and the drought hindered growth.

“But it was also kind of lovely when there was no one else here. Nature entered

the garden, but of course that means that the weed seed bank will have replenished itself. That’s what nature does.”

While the house at Mount Stewart is closed, the gardens were able to remain open for most of the year, although, of course, travel limitations meant they were in effect off limits for all but those living in close proximity. If limitations are lifted and you’re travelling from further afield, bring sandwiches (or a Downton-esque wicker picnic basket), though there is a grab-and-go system at the Mount Stewart tea rooms – and the horse box at the front of the house is also doing tea and coffees.

See www.nationaltrust.org.uk/mount-stewart

Continued on next page

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TRAVEL NEWS



WITH KEVIN FLANAGAN

Thailand to Reopen!

As the vaccination rollout continues worldwide, Thailand has announced the country will open its borders to fully vaccinated travellers from 1st July 2021. Which is great news, as the Asian country is a destination I am eager to explore.

The popular tourist island of Phuket will be the first destination in Thailand to welcome international travellers and from October, five further tourist areas – Krabi, Phangnga, Koh Samui, Chonburi (Pattaya) and Chiang Mai – will ease restrictions. “Thailand’s priority is to make tourism safe for both tourists and locals alike,” Ms Chiravadee Khunsub, Director of Tourism Authority of Thailand

(TAT) London told us. “From 1st July, quarantine will not be required for travellers visiting Phuket, on the basis they’ve been fully vaccinated and tested negative for Covid-19. Phuket has been Covid-19 free for 90 days, so it is a safe choice for travellers looking to get away this summer.”

All travellers will have to provide vaccination proof, take a Covid-19 test on arrival (at their hotel) and stay for at least seven days at the point of entry (i.e. Phuket), before travelling onwards around Thailand. All other destinations in Thailand are still subject to a seven-day mandatory area quarantine on arrival until further notice. All of us at Travel News welcome this positive news and look forward to visiting Thailand soon!

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Karon Viewpoint, Phuket

Customers have the flexibility to change holidays for free, or swap deposits for a voucher with no expiry date, right up until when their balance payments are due. This offer is available for all bookings up to 31st May 2021. Visit tdactiveholidays.com/holiday/donegal-walking-holiday

Ski Trends

On the back of an extremely difficult year for the travel industry, Irish family-owned tour operator Topflight are looking ahead with a strong sense of optimism and positivity. They are seeing a number of trends emerging, which include traditional ski resorts being the first choice, particularly in Austria, and skiers are looking to be pampered.

Bookings to Topflight’s hotels offering half-board are the option of choice. 4- and 5-Star properties are seeing the highest percentage increase. With this in mind, here is a great option if you are planning to hit the slopes next season:

Stay at 4-Star Hotel Jakobwirt in Westendorf, Austria, travelling from Dublin on 8th January 2022



Clodagh in Peru

for €1,142pps, or 12th March 2022 for €1,194pps. Also available from Cork and Belfast. Price includes return flights, accommodation for seven nights on a half-board basis, return transfers, taxes and Topflight’s in-resort management service. Call (01) 240 1700, visit topflight.ie or contact your local travel agent



Clodagh Dooley’s Pick of the Week: G Adventures

Recently, I was invited to a virtual travel event with Bruce Poon Tip, author and founder of G Adventures. Bruce wrote a short “instabook” back in April 2020 called *Unlearn: The Year the Earth Stood Still*, which shares his hopes for what tourism could look like after the pandemic.

And now, one year on, Bruce says he believes for the first time, the industry can start to look forward. He told us that lockdowns have

increased wanderlust, with a G Adventures survey reporting that 67% of British and Irish travellers say lockdowns have made them want to travel more than ever before. “Milestone holidays” and “bucket list” trips are high on the travel agenda, but travellers want to be more purposeful with their holiday choices and to know where their money is going. 72% of British and Irish travellers want their money to benefit local people. Once-in-a-lifetime trips, including high-profile hiking tours like Mt Kilimanjaro, Everest Base Camp and the Inca Trail, are attracting a lot of attention.

Having hiked the Inca Trail in Peru with G Adventures back in 2019, “purposeful trips” and “active tours” are definitely factors that will influence my future holiday choices. Not only was the 142km hike to the famous Incan citadel Machu Picchu a rewarding experience, but throughout the trip, my group really got the opportunity to immerse ourselves in local culture. I can’t wait to explore more cultures of the world!

Visit gadventures.com

Continued from previous page

4 Mount Usher, Co Wicklow
The picture-postcard gardens at Mount Usher are exactly 5.2km from the centre of Wicklow – which in the days of the 5km travel rule must pose an ethical challenge for the citizens of that lucky coastal town.

Norrie and I know Mount Usher well. We have our favourite plants there. She likes the handkerchief tree on the garden's main avenue, and predicts it'll probably be in full bloom six or seven weeks from now. I say I like the white magnolia that grows near the pond.

"The Magnolia sieboldii," she prods gently – and that's how I learn about plants. Knowledge handed down.

Mount Usher was planted 150 years ago by Edward Walpole, who took his inspiration from Irish gardener William Robinson – the green fuse behind the popularisation of the English cottage garden. Walpole took up the Robinsonian 'wild garden' concept and ran with it, and the result is a wonderful, 20-acre space that today holds more than 5,000 plant species tended by head gardener Seán Heffernan.

If you were to describe it in one word, that word would be "magical". Like Enid Blyton with roots and petals.

But with travel restrictions, we can only imagine what the bluebells look like today, and the rhododendrons, which are probably about to flower.

Mount Usher is open from 10am to 4.30pm, and with that grand stretch in the evenings you'd have enough time to slip in to the Avoca cafe, which has outdoor seating.

Ah, Mount Usher, the plants and the people who made it. Why don't they teach children about these sorts of heroes in school?

See mountushergardens.ie



5 The Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Co Dublin

These are open. Mostly. The spectacular wrought-iron greenhouses are shut, but the gardens have not been short of visitors. Being located a short walk from the centre of town makes them a green lung for Dubliners bored with walking around the Wellington Monument or the Blessington Street Basin.

They're also able to offer coffees and cakes and sandwiches for flâneurs – and "people are very happy with that".

I would be too if I lived within 5km of Glasnevin. I used to pig out on their chocolate cake with strawberries and cream.

Norrie used say I shouldn't be eating it but that it was fine for her to eat; she was older, so she needed the energy. I never saw the logic in that.

The cemetery gate at the Botanic Gardens remains open, so you can also ac-

cess the wealth of history that lies buried in Glasnevin Cemetery, Ireland's greatest graveyard.

Walk past the twisted and gnarled yew trees that line the path, and pop in and say hi to Mick Collins. In my mind's eye he's always got a smile. Not many dead people you can say that about.

The Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin are open from 10am to 5pm (and 6pm at weekends and bank holidays). If the gardens reach capacity – and on nice days they undoubtedly will – the gates shut, to allow some visitors to leave before allowing more to enter. All very civilised.

Finally, a delicate point, but one worth making: some of the loos are also open. Don't laugh. It's demanding and unglamorous work to keep them Covid clean. Well done the cleaners.

See botanicgardens.ie

7 The Dillon Garden, Co Dublin

You cannot talk about gardening in Ireland without mentioning Helen Dillon. From the early 1970s, the acre at the back of her house on Sandford Road was without doubt the most acclaimed private garden in Ireland.

I remind Norrie of the first time she brought me to Sandford Road on a visit, and Helen was growing bulbs in bright, shiny galvanised dustbins. Dillon pioneered so many plants and practices that when she sold the house in 2016, horticulturalists held their breath.

Well, she moved to a house in Monkstown and started a new garden, which in the past couple of years opened to the public. But this year, she's not so hasty.



"I'm not opening right now," she says, which will be a disappointment for her many supporters.

"I want to wait until we're absolutely sure we can open. I think that it may be more the end of May, or even early June. There'll be more colour in the garden then anyway."

Helen is one of the most passionate gardeners, and it's a passion she has always enjoyed sharing.

"More and more people have become terribly keen on gardening over the past year," she agrees. "There's always something to do."

Amen to that.

See dillongarden.com

6 Coosheen Garden, Co Cork

To maintain the sort of garden people want to visit, you need to master an entire range of skills. Most obviously you've got to learn to grow your garden, which means being a plants (wo)man and artist and weather expert. All that can take years.

You've got to bring your individuality into the mix, too. And then you've got to attract visitors, know how to weed, plants, weed, offer consultancy on garden design, weed, mentor young gardeners, weed, propagate, water, and do a bit more weeding.

And when you reach the end, you start again from the beginning. It's seasonal, see? You need a pioneering spirit to get by, and luckily that's something Hester Forde of Coosheen Garden in Glountaune, Co Cork has in spades.

"There's a peculiar stillness about the place now," Forde says of her garden, which is famous for its February snowdrops. Helen specialises in rare and unusual smaller perennials, alpines and bulbs, and Coosheen has been described as "a woodland garden in a suburban setting" – but for the moment it's on the want-to-visit list.

You can't just drop in anyway and would normally have to email hesterforde@gmail.com to set up a visit (which can include the coffee and cake thing, if you're minded).

Helen also does online lectures and talks, which she started developing during lockdown.

"A positive is that I have taken to Zoom to give my garden lectures, and I began an Instagram account. But I miss the social aspect and interaction with people."

"The garden at any time is therapy – and when I begin work, all matters on the mind dissolve and the task at hand occupies my thoughts. Gardening is like one long meditation."

On a more pragmatic side, she hopes that "there will be a great amount of supporting local businesses and buying local. Plant fairs cannot go ahead at the moment, so the small nursery is where you'll find the precious gems. Support will make a big difference to local and small nurseries," she adds.

Truer words were never spoken.

See hesterfordegarden.com



8 Cluain na dTóir Gardens, Co Donegal

I can tell you that Cluain na dTóir gardens in Falcarragh is definitely outside my 5km zone – 280km outside, in fact, in Google-eyed exactitude. So we're probably not going to be visiting this seaside garden until later in summer.

I call it a seaside garden, but it's a bit more than that. Settle down. Here's the quick story.

The garden came down to Seamus O'Donnell from his grandfather, who almost 100 years ago went to the Klondike gold fields to make his fortune and came home with his pockets full. About 30 years ago Seamus took the place over – and that's when things began to take shape.

He couldn't fight the wild weather off the Atlantic, so Seamus had to learn to go with the flow of nature. He planted trees for shelter, then underplanted with hardy grasses and shrubs and that was the genesis of his garden, which now blends in with the windswept landscape.

There's an almost tropical feel, as if in the shelter of the trees he managed to kick-start a microclimate. "My mission when I started was to attract nature into the gardens, and that's what I've been working at."

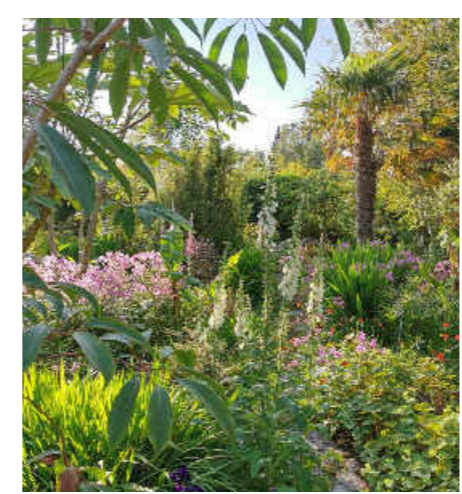
He's had a mixed bag during lockdown, though, as he explains. "I'm in heaven here, I really am in paradise surrounded by all these beautiful plants, but business-wise it's a bit of a disaster. Still, we'll get through it, we're a bit passionate

about what we do here." Seamus is not just a gardening visionary but a raconteur, with a wide range of interests. It's an outlook that grows easily in the peaty soil of Donegal, and we end up discussing Flann O'Brien (a regular visitor to nearby Gortahork) and his love of the colours of the bog and of native Irish bullrushes.

"I'm looking for plants and I can't find them," laments Seamus of the economic shutdown paralyzing the country. From 285km away I nod. But even if I was within 5km of Falcarragh, I'd have to wait to visit. The gardens aren't open yet.

"Hopefully the beginning of May," he says wistfully.

See seasideplants.eu



9 Shackleton Gardens, Co Dublin

You can't mention polar exploration to Norrie without her bringing the subject around to Shackleton Gardens in Clonsilla, West Dublin.

The way she tells it, the hero of the South Atlantic is the minor branch of the family, while gardener David Shackleton is very much the main man. That's spin for you.

But the spin is understandable, as during the 1970s Norrie spent most Sundays visiting the Shackleton Gardens. As my other half never tires of telling me: "Other children were brought to the seaside. We were brought to garden centres."

The walled gardens are small – 1.5 acres

at a pinch – and were bought by Fingal County Council in 2018 with the idea of opening them up to the public.

Norrie texts me photos of the peonies in her own garden, which she bought in Shackleton. "And it had some lovely celmsia and lady slipper orchids too," she adds.

All these memories mean that the Shackleton Garden is probably the garden she's dreaming of. And I hope we're with her when it reopens. Come on Fingal Co Council. We're rooting for you. (I've got loads of these garden jokes).

See Twitter @shackletongard / Instagram @theshackletongardens

10 Homegrown heroes

When Norrie and myself started listing our Top 10 gardens, there was much wistful dreaming going back and forth over the phone. Where would we go, and when, to see what...

But every night the conversations returned to one topic. A topic very close to home. And well inside 5km.

I didn't realise it until I sat down to compile our horticultural ramblings, but we kept returning to the plants we had seen that afternoon, having walked the footpaths in our respective built-up neighbourhoods.

And while we can fantasise of visiting Hunting Brook, and are dying to see the blue poppies in Mount Stewart, our neighbourhoods are filled with the gardens that will see us through this second lockdown spring.

There's a cherry tree on Palmerstown Drive that has both pink and white flowers. It's very beautiful and worthy of much wonder.

On Oliver Plunkett Road there's a house with rows of young dahlias shyly peeping out of the clay. The bulbs saw out winter in the ground, and their



Flora fans Shane and Norrie in the Burren pre-lockdown

deep red and slight green shoots hold all the promise of a year's blooms to come.

Just this morning I saw the half-unwrapped buds of a magnolia and it stopped me in my tracks.

So get out and walk, and rubberneck. There are front gardens, and county council plantings and they're all yardsticks on our repeated lockdown walks.

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