

SOUTHERN GUESTS - PLANTS FROM THE SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE IN OUR GARDENS

Northern Ireland Heritage Gardens Committee

Conference at Clondeboye Lodge Hotel, Bangor 11th, 12th & 13th October 2013

The Committee started out in 1980 as a small group of voluntary, like-minded horticulturists committed to preserving for future generations the Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes in Northern Ireland. Today it has members from the Republic of Ireland and covers the whole island of Ireland. The main function of the Committee is to promote an awareness of the importance of these historic gardens through their annual conferences.

It was 15 years ago when I last attended a conference organized by the NIHGC. On that occasion they were able to pack in 10 speakers and two site visits over a weekend. This was during the period of 'The Great Gardens of Ireland Restoration Scheme'. The conference was buzzing with Estate garden owners, professionals and experts, all eager to acquire funding to restore the old demesnes and networking intensely. These days it is a more sedate affair with 8 speakers and 2 site visits, but still very impressive. As expected in these recessionary times the conferences have experienced a sharp fall in the number of delegates. Still this did not stop the committee (members are selected by invitation only) to once again organise a very successful event. Having been involved myself in the early years of organising seminars for the GLDA, I can fully appreciate the time and effort put in by the committee, which is self-financing and voluntary.

After a 5 hour drive from Lismore on the Friday evening a reception and refreshments awaited me, followed by a late replacement talk given by **Donal Synnott** (retired Director of Botanic Gardens). He gave an interesting and entertaining talk on the early days of the Herbarium (founded in 1847 and originally housed in the National Museum). It is now located in the Botanic Gardens in a state of the art building.

The following day, Saturday, **Mike Nelhams**, head gardener of Tresco, Cornwall shared his experiences of their devastating losses during the harsh winters of 2010 and 2011. It was interesting to hear about their windbreak solutions – the use of *Metrosideros robusta/ excelsa*, *Olearia traversii* and others.

Michael Lear, former Castwellan Forest Park Manager, followed with a talk on 'North Versus South: Comparisons and Observations among cultivation of Gondwana'. Mentioning many of my favourite plants: *Codyline indivisa*, *Pseudopanax ferox* and *laetus*, *Nothofagus fusca*, *Dacrydium cupressinum* and *Eucryphia*'s. Quoting also from "Shrubs for the milder counties" written by W. Arnold-Forster published first in 1948 but still proving to be still very relevant.

Neil Porteous, former head gardener at the Balinatray Estate near Youghal and now in charge of Mount Stewart and all the other National Trust properties in Northern Ireland gave an excellent rundown on over 42 different southern hemisphere plants thriving in Irish gardens. He pointed out that generally the light levels in Ireland are insufficient for these beautiful plants to thrive. To overcome this he recommended high potassium feed to stimulate flowering. After lunch he gave us a guided tour of Mount Stewart Gardens. The main house is currently being restored by the Trust, and the gardens as always are in excellent condition. We were very privileged to have access to the private burial ground of Lady Edenderry. This secluded area had a wonderful view over the lake.

After dinner that evening **Mike Snowden** (retired head gardener of Rowallane Gardens) told us of his (working) holiday in South West Australia including early morning swims with the dolphins. His talk was entitled 'Bush, Forest & Coast: An experience in South West Australia'.

On Sunday morning it was **Paul Maher's** (Curator, National Botanic Gardens) turn. He spoke on 'Southern Hemisphere Exiles in Irish gardens', describing over 50 plants thriving in certain parts of Ireland. He also announced to us the long awaited good news that OPW had officially taken over Mount Congreve Gardens and that these gardens together with Kilmacurragh would now be linked with the Botanic Gardens.

Seamus Galvin was the next speaker, head gardener of the privately owned Garinish Island (not to be confused with Garnish Island, Inacullin managed by OPW). He informed us that their shelterbelt consists of *Oleria traversii*. *Lagarostrobos* (*Dacrydium*) *franklinii* 'Pendulum', *Hakea salicifolius*, *Lomatia tinctoria* and *Podocarpus salignus* were also mentioned as was *Schima khasiana*, the latter being one of his favourites. He even remembered acquiring it from me many years ago. In fact *Schima* was later admired at the Clondeboyne Demesne residence of Lady Dufferin, our 2nd site visit that afternoon. It was still in full flower and one delegate was overheard saying "I first saw them in Burma". So I was in good company, with well-travelled and knowledgeable plantsmen!

Noeleen Smyth, OPW (Conservation Botanist) ended the conference with a talk on 'Fugitives - Southern hemisphere plants that have jumped the garden fence and thrive in the wild'. She warned that in some cases they can become a pest. An official list now exists: (www.invasivespeciesireland.com). I am glad to say that bamboos are not included on this list! She gave a practical overview on the ongoing eradication of the Hottentot Fig (*Carpobrotus edulis*) from South Africa which was introduced in 1962 on Howth Head. It now poses a serious ecological threat on the cliffs there.

All in all it was a most enjoyable and informative weekend. It was a pleasure to meet up again with old friends and colleagues. The Committee are considering plans to hold the October 2014 conference in the South of Ireland, subject to finding a suitable venue. I can strongly recommend attending the next conference, wherever it is held. It is an excellent opportunity to meet like-minded people involved in ornamental horticulture, to listen and learn from experts in their own field and at the same time to enjoy a very sociable gathering in splendid surroundings.

Peter Stam, MGLDA