

## The Ladies Walled Garden

A stroll through the garden at Kells begins in the quaint Ladies Walled Garden, constructed by Sir Rowland Ponsonby Blennerhassett during the 1870s and named for his wife, Lady Mary Blennerhassett. Passing through the arch, one meets a grove of the striking Chilean rust-barked myrtle *Luma apiculata*, now a great favourite in milder Irish gardens. Introduced to cultivation by the Cornish plant hunter William Lobb (1809-1864) in 1843, it was first offered for sale by Lobb's employers, the English nursery firm Messrs Veitch. In Kerry gardens, it is as happy as if in its native Chile and Argentina. It is best seen in a woodland situation, more so when planted closely as a group, where trees are drawn up to show to best advantage the wonderful flaking cinnamon-brown bark. As if this were not enough, in late summer and early autumn trees are bedecked in staminous white blossoms followed by juicy black berries that are gorged on by hungry blackbirds.

At Glanleam, on nearby Valentia Island, a variegated seedling of the Chilean myrtle was found by the garden's then owner Mrs Peggy Uniacke during the 1950s and was named 'Glanleam Gold'. It's a fine garden plant and available through garden centres in Britain and Ireland. The plant here in walled garden at Kells descends from the Glanleam original.

*Strobilanthes atropurpureus*, a wiry sub-shrub from the western Himalaya, might be considered as one of the hallmark plants of Kerry gardens. Though rare in gardens elsewhere, it is found in virtually every sheltered garden in coastal Kerry and is valuable on account of its late flowered season. In late autumn this sprawling species bears masses of tubular, hooded indigo-purple blossoms. The New Zealand genus *Pseudopanax* contains several bizarre species of exotic foliage plants, none more so than *Pseudopanax crassifolius*, commonly known as the lancewood. Ultimately a small evergreen tree, this species has three distinct

foliage phases, the strangest of which is when it is a juvenile and bears long narrow lanced-shaped leaves up to 90 cm (3 ft) long by just 2.5 cm (1 inch) wide, of a strange reptilian purple-brown hue. The adult leaves are entirely different – it's said the lancewood evolved this way to protect itself from the Moa, a giant grazing flightless bird that has been extinct from the New Zealand avifauna for over three centuries now. Perhaps someone should let the lancewood know! Nearby grows the allied *Pseudopanax colensoi*, again highlighting the diversity of this handsome group of striking foliage plants.

Another inhabitant of the walled garden at Kells is the Chilean lantern tree, *Crinodendron hookerianum*, a valuable late-flowered evergreen shrub bearing masses of crimson, lantern-like blossoms on long pendulous stalks in late May and June. In mild Irish gardens like Kells and Kilmacurragh it has formed enormous tree-like specimens and it is rare in its native Chile. It was introduced to cultivation by William Lobb in 1848 from the sub-Antarctic forests near Valdivia in southern Chile.

As you continue your way across the old flagstones underfoot, you'll notice many recent plantings including the rare bellflower relative *Musschia wollastonii*. A native of Madeira, this half-hardy perennial carries tightly packed rosettes of hairy leaves and after a wait of a year or two produces a pyramidal inflorescence, up to 1.5 m (5 ft) tall, bearing hundreds of tightly packed chartreuse blooms. Sadly, it's an endangered species in its native Madeira nowadays; less than 250 mature plants remain in the wild and cultivated specimens like this play an important role in the species conservation. Another Madeiran endemic growing nearby is the wonderful lily of the valley tree, *Clethra arborea*. Normally suited to glasshouse culture only, this tree was first trialled for hardiness by Sir Peter Fitzgerald, 19<sup>th</sup> Knight of Kerry, at his garden on nearby Valentia Island in the 1870s, and he distributed it widely, even sending plants by yacht to the Dorrien-

Smith's on Tresco. As its common name implies, it bears masses of sweetly scented lily of the valley-like blossoms in late summer and it is one of the most exciting trees to be encountered in the gardens of south-west Ireland.

A little further along the path we meet with two fine myrtles, both native to Chile. The first, *Amomyrtus luma* (syn. *Myrtus lechleriana*), generally forms a small tree and has two seasons of interest; the first in spring when it sports copper-coloured young growth. These are followed in May by a myriad of fragrant white blossoms. It was introduced to European gardens by the English plant collector Harold Comber (1897-1969) from Chile. Comber was born at Nymans Gardens in Sussex (where his father was Head Gardener) and spent the years between 1925 to 1927 exploring the Andes from where he sent back enormous consignments of seeds. Many of his introductions are now firm favourites in the coastal gardens of Ireland today.

The second myrtle, *Ugni molinae* (syn. *Myrtus ugni*), is commonly known as the Chilean guava, on account of its delicious, highly fragrant mahogany-red berries. We met with it on several occasions during the 2007 Glasnevin Chile Expedition, especially in the coastal hills north of Valdivia. It is a favourite fruit in south-central Chile and in autumn (April/May in Chile), enormous quantities of its fruit – alongside those of the monkey puzzle, *Araucaria araucana* – are sold in local markets. It was widely grown beneath glass, in 'orchard houses', in Britain and Ireland during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and it's said Queen Victoria's favourite preserve was made from its berries – commonly known today as ugni fruits.

Another great favourite of southern Irish gardens is the New Zealand pepper bush, *Pseudowintera colorata*. A member of the extremely ancient flowering family Winteraceae, this relict species is in common use as an understory shrub in dense forest on New Zealand's South Island. In gardens it is a much-prized foliage plant because of its curiously coloured crimson-purple foliage, which has a hot peppery taste due to polygodial compounds, which also have insecticidal and anti-fungal properties. Close by, grows another member of the Antipodean flora, the muskwood from south-east Australia and Tasmania. In several Kerry gardens, and at Mount Stewart in Co. Down, it has formed small trees and its silvery-grey, tomentose branches and leaf undersides are particularly attractive. In Tasmania it forms enormous specimens; in 2010 I saw it there for myself, growing with towering tree ferns, *Dicksonia antarctica*, in the lower altitude parts of McGregor's Peak on the south-east of the island. The tree at Kells is a particularly good specimen.

Our stroll continues on through the walled garden, past a scrambling kiwi fruit vine, *Actinidia chinensis*. As the name indicates, it is not at all native to New Zealand, but a Chinese endemic, and there it is locally known as the 'Chinese gooseberry' or 'Yichang gooseberry'. Though it rarely produces fully ripe fruits in Ireland (male and female clones are needed for pollination), these rampant vines do add an exotic touch when seen scaling surrounding trees. A little further on, we meet with one of Kells Garden's rarest inhabitants, the Chonta palm, *Juania australis*, a feather palm native to the Juan Fernández Islands Archipelago (made famous by Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe), a remote island range over 400 miles off the coast of Chile. It is one of the world's rarest and most difficult palm species and the only mature specimen outside its native territory is at Earlscliffe, in Howth, Co. Dublin. Close to it grows another great rarity, *Bowkeria verticillata* (syn. *B. gerrardiana*), the shellflower from Natal. The genus *Bowkeria* was

named by the Irish botanist William Henry Harvey (1811-1866), a Quaker from Co. Limerick, who spent seven years at the Cape from 1835 and became an expert on the South African flora. He chose to name this small group of flowering shrubs in honour of the noted South African botanist Colonel James Henry Bowker (1822-1900). It makes a charming sight in August when carrying cymes of white *Calceolaria*-like blossoms.

The whiteywood, *Acradenia frankliniae* is endemic to the rainforests of western Tasmania, particularly on the banks of the Franklin River, where it was first found in 1842. It is grown primarily for its dark evergreen foliage and handsome form, but also bears terminal corymbs of small white blossoms in May. It is not quite hardy and as a result is restricted to the milder gardens of Britain and Ireland. Directly ahead, towards the edge of the walled garden is an enormous fat-trunked *Dicksonia antarctica*, thought to be the original 'mother' plant, first planted at Kells during the 1870s. Now the most commonly planted tree fern in the Northern Hemisphere, this species was accidentally introduced to cultivation through the use of their trunks as ballast or weight to prevent cargoes moving about during long sea journeys during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When ships were unloaded on the docks of harbours in south-west England, someone noticed them re-sprouting and had them planted in the warmer gardens of Devon and Cornwall where they thrived.

Other exotic ferns in this area of the walled garden include *Blechnum chilense*, a mainstay of coastal woodland gardens in Ireland. Demanding humus rich, acidic soil, this bold evergreen fern spreads to form extensive colonies and is native to Argentina, Chile and the Juan Fernández Islands. In Chile, it is known (in Chilean Spanish) as *costilla de vaca* or 'cow's rib', a reference to the narrow pinnate fronds of this species. It has very recently endured a name change – *Blechnum cordatum*, though the earlier, more familiar *Blechnum chilense* is bound to endure in gardens

for many years yet. Perhaps more exciting still is the kangaroo fern, *Phymatosorus diversifolius* (syn. *Microsorium diversifolium*), first described as new to science in 1810 when it was reported from New Holland and Van Diemen's Land – today's Australia and Tasmania. It is also widespread in New Zealand and in its native habitat it is often found creeping over rocks as an epilith or on trees as an epiphyte. In gardens it has always remained a great rarity. The plants at Kells are the finest examples in any Irish or British garden.

Sheltering the kangaroo fern, outside the bounds of the walled garden, are fine trees of the common lime, *Tilia x europaea*, a familiar and long-lived tree in Irish demesnes. The tree here was probably planted by the Blennerhassetts in late Victorian times. Of more interest to plantsmen specialising in exotic foliage is a fine Chusan or Chinese windmill palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei*. This is the only palm species that is truly hardy throughout Ireland, though its large fan-like leaves do appreciate protection from strong winds. It gives an exotic look to gardens beneath grey Irish skies and is named for the great Scottish plant hunter, Robert Fortune (1812-1880) who collected plants on Chusan (now Zhousan) Island, off the east coast of China in 1849. The plants Fortune saw were cultivated specimens. The Chusan palm, despite its common name, is actually native to Central China, and in 2002 our expedition from the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, collected material in the famous Three Gorges Region of Hubei Province. An avenue raised from seeds collected back then now grows at Kilmacurragh.

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