

## **The Broad Walk**

Our trail continues along the Broad Walk to the rear of the house past fine plants of the Chinese *Rhododendron williamsianum*. Discovered by the British plant hunter E. H. Wilson (1876-1930) on Wa-shan in western Sichuan in 1908, it is extremely rare in the wild, but has become a firm favourite in gardens and is perfectly lime tolerant. A little ahead grow two Tasmanian endemics; *Lomatia tinctoria*, a low suckering shrub allied to the South African proteas and bearing creamy-white blossoms in long spreading racemes. In its native home it grows in dry eucalypt forest, while its bedfellow *Lagarostrobus franklinii*, the Huon pine, prefers damp forest and riverbanks. This graceful conifer, with its beautifully weeping branches has been over-exploited in Tasmania due to massive logging projects in the past.

Again, we meet with the Chilean lantern tree, *Crinodendron hookerianum*, but here growing with vigour rarely seen in European gardens. The plantings here were laid out by the famous British plantsman and explorer, Roy Lancaster, who advised at Kells during the 1980s. Near it is another Chilean endemic, the remarkably beautiful coral plant, *Berberidopsis corallina*, introduced by the Veitchian plant hunter Richard Pearce (1835-1868) from Valdivia during the 1860s. There it forms gigantic vines that scale the tallest forest trees and a fibre from its stems is woven into baskets by local Mapuche Indians. Sadly, it's endangered in its native habitat today. In gardens it is a firm favourite on account of its pendant racemes of fleshy red-crimson blossoms borne in July.

Giving shelter to the gardens are several giant firs, the North American *Abies grandis*. This fine tree thrives best in the wetter parts of Britain and Ireland and the Kells specimens certainly seem happy since their planting in the late 19<sup>th</sup>

century. Several specimens blew over on the River Walk during the great storm of February 2014, revealing that they grew in less than a metre of soil with solid bedrock below. Beneath them are fine plants of *Rhododendron sinogrande*, a tree-like species whose leaves can be almost a metre long and bear enormous trusses of lemon-yellow blossoms. It is best suited to sheltered woodland gardens where its big leaves add a distinctly exotic air. Among the many camellias in this part of the garden my own personal favourite is *Camellia japonica* 'Hagoromo', an old Japanese selection better known by the name 'Magnoliaeflora', which it was given on first arriving in Europe. It has a charm and quality that is often lacking in the more recently-bred cultivars.

The gardens of Cornwall and Kerry would be much the lesser if it were not for the collections of the great Veitchian plant hunter William Lobb. This intrepid Cornish explorer travelled to Chile twice during the 1840s introducing many of the plants we enjoy in milder coastal gardens today. One of these, *Rhapithamnus spinosus*, is a large, spiny evergreen shrub, grown on account of the wonderful purple-blue pea-sized berries it bears in autumn. It is particularly vulnerable to cold, drying winter winds and is therefore best grown in a corner sheltered from winter gales. I have seen it wild in the woods north of Valdivia where it grew with other good garden plants like *Lapageria rosea*, *Luma apiculata*, *Eucryphia cordifolia* and the stunning silver-fronded *Lophosoria quadripinnata*.

The Himalayan dogwood, *Cornus capitata* is another great staple of old Irish gardens, thriving in our mild, damp climate. It eventually forms a small, elegant tree up to 12 m (40 ft.) and in July the canopy is literally smothered in sulphur-yellow blossom-like bracts. These are followed in autumn with strawberry-like fruits. It is perhaps the best of the flowering dogwoods for the coastal parts of Ireland, particularly West Cork and Kerry. Strolling on, we meet *Viburnum*

*cylindricum*, an evergreen species from the Himalaya and China, that ultimately forms a small tree, given time. The silvery foliage of this species is particularly attractive, though it is liable to be damaged in severe winters, thus the best specimens are found in coastal districts.

Just ahead, you'll spot some ferocious dinosaurs, *Tyrannosaurus rex* ssp. *kellsensis* forma *alexanderensis*, fierce creatures sculpted from fallen trees of *Pinus radiata* and *Abies grandis*. Around them are planted a number of mountain cabbage trees, including *Cordyline indivisa*, one of the most outstanding foliage plants we can grow in Ireland. The aristocrat of its clan, it forms a small sparingly branched, fat-trunked tree of about 6 m (20 ft) tall, bearing tufts of lance-shaped leaves up to 2m (6.5 ft) long, 25 cm (10 in) wide, suffused blue-white beneath and with wonderful orange-red veins above. The long, pendulous racemes of violet-black fruits are spectacular in autumn.

### **The Bamboo Glade**

This open glade is a damp, sheltered strip of land containing a fine collection of bamboo species planted in recent times by the current owner Billy Alexander. Many have been selected for the colour of their culms, like the Himalayan *Dendrocalamus hookeri* (blue), *Phyllostachys bambusoides* 'Castilloni' (orange-yellow) or the jet-black *Phyllostachys nigra* 'Othello', for example. Nearby grows *Magnolia doltsopa*, one of the finest of the evergreen spring-flowered magnolias. Native to western China and the Himalaya, it is also common in warm-temperate forests in the tiny Indian State of Sikkim, where its timber is highly valued and is used to build altars in Buddhist monasteries. Also growing close by is another native of the Sino-Himalayan region, *Rubus linearis*, an aristocratic bramble with silvery stems bearing beautiful foliage, broken into five leaflets, plastered with a silvery indumentum beneath. I've seen it wild in warm-temperate forests on the China-Vietnam border and again on Tiger Hill near

Darjeeling in West Bengal (India). It's one of my absolute favourite garden plants and the extensive colony at Kells is a fine sight.

### **Fossil Valley**

This area of the garden is so-named because of the grove of *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* – the dawn redwood or fossil tree – planted in the 1980s, when the famous English plantsman, Roy Lancaster OBE VMH, advised on replanting the gardens at Kells. Lancaster was one of the very first contemporary plant hunters to visit China following its reopening to the West during the 1980s and the fossil trees at Kells were obviously inspired by his many botanical expeditions in China. The fossil tree was thought to have been extinct for millions of years until three trees were discovered in a remote village in western Hubei province in 1941. In 1947, the remarkable story of the discovery and introduction of *Metasequoia* hit the headlines the world over, and, in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, in March 1948, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* was first called the “dawn redwood”. Alongside another common name, the “fossil tree”, this has become the tree's most popular common name in the West.

In September 2002, before sailing the Three Gorges on the Yangtze, our expedition from the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, we made a brief visit to the tiny village of Modaoqi, where in 1941, the Chinese forester Professor T. Kan found the original 'type' tree from which the species was described. It was like a pilgrimage to see such a famous tree, the distant ancestor of the American redwoods, *Sequoia* and *Sequoiadendron*. A seedling raised from our visit grows at the National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, Glasnevin's sister garden in east Co. Wicklow.

Bamboos reappear in this area, in the form of *Fargesia lushiensis* from north-west Yunnan, where its foliage is a source of food for giant pandas. The aptly named *Chusquea gigantea* from South America creates a true jungle-like atmosphere in warmer British and Irish gardens where its culms can easily soar to 10 m (33 ft).

Passing a fine young tree of the Chinese fir, *Cunninghamia lanceolata*, we meet *Himalayocalamus porcatus*, a tidy clump-forming bamboo from Nepal with striking blue canes. Himalayan bamboo species prefer slightly shaded, damp conditions in cultivation – conditions easily met at Kells.

Close-by grows the critically endangered *Glyptostrobus pensilis*, the Chinese water pine discovered in east China by the Galway man, Sir George Leonard Staunton (1737-1801) in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. Sadly, it is no longer found wild in China, though about 250 wild trees still exist in northern Vietnam and Laos. Cultivated plants, like those at Kells, play an important role in the conservation of threatened species.

Newly introduced exotics are scattered throughout the gardens at Kells, including the Taiwanese endemic *Fatsia polycarpa* – a dramatic improvement on the more commonly encountered *Fatsia japonica*. Its bedfellows include the Tasmanian *Tasmannia lanceolata* (a close relative to the Chilean *Drimys winteri*, though lower growing) and *Eucryphia cordifolia* from Chile, a handsome evergreen tree bearing masses of large white staminous blossoms in August, bringing cheer to our gardens when few other trees are in bloom.

Holding its own among all these exotics is the native Irish Killarney Strawberry tree, *Arbutus unedo*, a rare inhabitant of the woods of south-west Ireland and the

Mediterranean region. It is not a native of Britain; land bridges, cut off by rising sea levels millennia ago, prevented it reaching our neighbouring island, and it is one of several Hiberno-Lusitanian plants with limited distribution in south-west Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

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National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, Kilbride, Co Wicklow