

The Gunnera Pool

The Gunnera Pool, so named because of the expanse of *Gunnera manicata*, makes a bold and dramatic statement in this part of the garden. This species is cultivated on account of its gigantic handsome foliage. *Gunnera manicata* is a South American native, from the cloud forests of Columbia to Brazil and it's believed that *Gunnera* evolved some 150 million years ago, during the time of the dinosaurs. The genus sports glands that contain the cyanobacterium Nostoc, which fixes nitrogen for the plant, meaning *Gunnera* can thrive in extremely poor conditions, unfit for most other plants. *Gunnera* is the only plant in the world with this unique relationship with cyanobacterium.

Gunneras come with a warning though. The Chilean *Gunnera tinctoria* has now become an invasive species in the west of Ireland, particularly the outlying islands like Clare Island off Co. Galway and in Connemara. On Valentia Island it has escaped from the confines of Glanleam Gardens in the last decade and is making steady progress along roadsides. *Gunnera manicata* has worryingly become established in the New Zealand countryside, perhaps indicating it is only a matter of time before it does the same in Ireland. Gardens can help by dead heading their plants to prevent seed set.

Continuing along the trail, we meet one of the Tasmanian epacrids, *Richea pandinifolia*, a giant grass tree which is endemic to Tasmania. Around Dove Lake in Cradle Mountain National Park, it forms trees up to 12 m (40 ft) tall, there it often grows in association with the pencil pine, *Athrotaxis cupressoides* (which is also found in the plant collection at Kells).

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