

The Cliff Walk

In contrast to the shade of the River Walk, the Cliff Walk is a warm, sunny, sheltered area of Kells, perched high up on riverside cliffs with fantastic views towards the cone-like Cnoc na d'Tobar, a lofty mountain that overshadows the Kells Bay area. The area opened in 2008 to enable the clearance of *Rhododendron ponticum*, which had formerly enveloped this part of the gardens.

The Cliff Walk gets off to a good start with groves of young plants of the Chusan palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, inspired planting by the current owner. A young plantation of Scot's pine, *Pinus sylvestris* will provide future shelter and interest for the many new exotics recently sited here. It's a plantsman's miscellany of good garden plants in this area, like the Himalayan *Rhododendron arboreum* var. *cinnamomeum* that will eventually reach tree-like proportions over the course of the next one hundred years. The South African sage wood, *Buddleja salviifolia* is easily identified on account of its sage-like foliage and is remarkably hardy for a shrub originating from the south-western Cape Province. It's said to be the first shrub to recover in the mountain forests of South Africa after a fire and bears fragrant flowers in early summer that vary from white to pale lilac.

Another Cape native, the silver tree, *Leucadendron argenteum* has also been planted in this garden area, and, should it succeed, it will be one of the most exciting plants at Kells. It has been grown successfully in Ireland before, albeit in a dryer climate, by the late Dr David Robinson in his garden at Earlscliffe in Howth, Co. Dublin. A member of the protea family, the leaves of this tree are covered in dense velvety hairs giving the tree a brilliant silver sheen. The secret in cultivating this tricky customer is to give it sharply drained soil, low in nutrients and absolutely free air movement around the plant. All around the silver tree are masses of the native purple moor grass *Molinia caerulea*, one of the most beautiful of our Irish wild grasses.

A little further on we meet *Aralia echinocaulis*, to which we give the common name 'Satan's staff'; a viciously-armed small tree bearing masses of equally thorny pinnate leaves. It was introduced to cultivation by our expedition from Glasnevin to Central China in the autumn of 2002 and is a fine foliage plant. It jostles with Himalayan *Rhododendron* species like the blood-red flowered *Rhododendron thomsonii* and the tender *Rhododendron maddenii*, named for the Irish plant collector Edward Madden (1805-1856).

The wheel tree, *Trochodendron aralioides* gains its name from the arrangement of stamens that spread out in the arrangement of wheels. It's another plant botanists refer to as a 'living fossil', having survived down through the aeons while others through the course of time became extinct. It's slow growing, rare in cultivation and eventually forms a small tree. In the wild it's confined to Japan, Korea and Taiwan.

Lomatia ferruginea is another firm favourite in coastal gardens around Ireland on account of its magnificent fern-like foliage and rusty-brown, velvety stems. Native to Chile and Argentina, it was introduced as long ago as 1846 by William Lobb from south-central Chile and forms a small tree. Clustered racemes of tawny-yellow and red blossoms are carried in July and it self-seeds in several Irish gardens, including Mount Usher in Co. Wicklow.

On the lower end of the Cliff Walk, sit into the seat 'Contemplation' – carved from a felled giant fir – place your head right back and look up into the canopy above of towering fir and pines – a magical scene when accompanied by an ink blue sky. A little further on, two more of William Lobb's Chilean introductions come into view, the rare Prince Albert yew, *Saxegothaea conspicua*, named in honour of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's consort who came from the Prussian province of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. With it grows the holly-like *Desfontainea spinosa*, an evergreen shrub to 3 m (10 ft) tall, with a massive native range across the Andes from Columbia to the Straits of Magellan. It is very much at home in the gardens

of Ireland and is particularly attractive in late summer when carrying masses of scarlet tubular blossoms with a yellow mouth.

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