

A Look Back at the Southern Symposium

Listening, Questioning, Discussing and Learning

In the Summer of 2014, after 7 years in Kells Bay, Billy Alexander reached the “End of the Beginning” of his work at Kells. The mammoth task of reclaiming the Gardens and restoring the House was in hand and it was now time to celebrate and publicise the achievement. A Who’s Who of Irish horticulture assembled at Kells Bay heard talks from Seamus O’Brien of the National Botanic Gardens and the legendary Roy Lancaster.

The weekend of discussion, food, wine and fun in the gardens was such a success it was instituted as an annual event to celebrate gardening, plants and landscapes. Since then, the event has become fixed as a highlight of Munster’s horticultural calendar. Its roll-call of speakers is a list of the horticultural Pantheon.

The wonderful hospitality, relaxed and friendly atmosphere ensure delegates return annually to renew, refresh and learn.

Guest Speakers Over the Years

The first nine years of the Southern Symposium has seen a diverse range of topics, wonderful guest speakers and expert advice, with lots of new friendships made along the way. Here’s a look back at the guest speakers and themes during that time:

2014

Roy Lancaster CBE	Former Curator of the Hillier Arboretum, England "A Plantsman’s Garden"
Seamus O’Brien	National Botanic Gardens of Ireland, Kilmacurragh "A Journey to the Antipodes– in search of Southern Hemisphere Treasures"

2015

Thomas Pakenham	Tullyally Castle & Gardens, Co. Westmeath "The Company of Trees"
Mike Nelhams	Curator Tresco Abbey Garden, Isles of Scilly "The Tresco Abbey Years"
Seamus O’Brien	National Botanic Gardens of Ireland, Kilmacurragh "Sikkim in Colour"

2016

Richard Baines
Curator, Logan Botanic Gardens, Scotland
"Logan Botanic Gardens, Scotland's Most Exotic Gardens"

Neil Porteous
Head of Gardens, Mount Stewart Gardens, Ards, Co. Down
"Travels in North East India for Mount Stewart"

Neil Armstrong
Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens, Cornwall, England
"Tremenheere, the Ideas, Artwork and Plants"

2017

Nick Macer
Pan Global Plants, Gloucestershire, England
"Plant Exploring around the World"

Tony Kirkham
Head of the Arboretum and Horticultural Services at the Royal Botanic Garden, Kew, England
"Wilson's China - A Century On" Stepping in the footsteps of Ernest Henry Wilson the great plant collector

June Blake
June Blakes Garden, Tinode, Blessington, Co. Wicklow
"Painterly Planting with June Blake"

2018

Matthew Pottage
Curator, RHS Garden Wisley, England
"A new chapter for the RHS Flagship Garden"

Ken Cox
Glendoick Gardens, Scotland
"Woodland Gardening in Europe, America, Japan, Australia and NZ"

Seamus Galvin
Gar Inish Island, Co. Kerry
"Gulf Stream Gardening"

2019

Tom Hart-Dyke
World Garden of Plants, Lullingstone Castle, England
"Plant Hunter & Gardener with Passion"

Jimi Blake
Hunting Brook Gardens, Co. Wicklow
"A Beautiful Obsession" A plantsman journey in his own garden

Adam Whitbourn
Blarney Castle Gardens, Co. Cork
"Bringing Back Blarney"

2022

John Anderson
Keeper of the Gardens, Windsor Great Park, England
"A Head Gardener's journey from Mount Usher to Windsor"

Alasdair Moore
Lost Gardens of Heligan, Cornwall, England
"Tresco and Heligan: plants, history and meaning"

Robert Wilson-Wright
Coolcarrigan House & Gardens, Co. Kildare
"Isle of Bliss The remote island of Socotra"

Darach Lupton
National Botanic Gardens of Ireland, Dublin
"Hop, Skip and Jump – the Curious Distribution of some of Ireland's most Enigmatic Native Plants."

2023

Daniel J. Hinkley
1st Talk
2nd Talk
Windcliff, Washington State, USA
"From Shadows to Sun; Making Windcliff"
"The Treasures of Vietnam".

Bleddyn & Sue Wynn-Jones
Crug Farm, Wales
"Seed and plant collecting in the mountains of Colombia"

Seamus O'Brien
National Botanic Gardens of Ireland, Kilmacurragh
"Van Diemen's Land's wildflowers: The British-Irish Botanical Expedition to Tasmania"

Ken Cox
Glendoick Gardens, Scotland
"100 Years of Glendoick talk, 1919-2019"

Jack Aldridge
RHS Garden Wisley, England
"The Woody Plant Wonders of Wisley and Beyond"

2024

Scott McMahan
1st Talk
2nd Talk

Atlanta Botanical Garden, Georgia, USA
“Plant Exploration in Vietnam and N.E. India”
“Ex situ Plant Conservation at The Atlanta Botanical Garden”

Adam Frost

BBC Gardeners World
“For a Love of Plants”

Derry Watkins

Special Plants Nursery, Chippenham, England
“Breathless - Plants of the Andes, Himalaya and Alps”

Jimi Blake

Hunting Brook Gardens, Co. Wicklow
“A Deep Dive into the Woodand plant Collection in Hunting Brook”

Neil Armstrong

Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens, Cornwall, England

2025

Sir Tim Smit KBE

The Lost Gardens of Heligan, St. Austell, Cornwall, England
“Phoenix from the Ashes, the second coming of horticulture and the dawning of a new civilisation”

Kelly Dodson and Sue Milliken

Far Reaches Farm
“Plant Obsession Meets Conservation in the Far Reaches of Washington State”

Raf Lenaerts

Botanic Treasures, Antwerp, Belgium
“Cultivating Rare and New Magnolias”

Mark Collins

Dhu Varren Garden, Milltown, Co. Kerry
“Botanic Highlights from my Excursions to New Zealand and Chile”

Oliver Schurmann

Mount Venus Nursery, Rathfarnham, Dublin 16
“20 Years of Show-Gardens, Design and Planting”

Peadar Collins

The Irish Tree Centre, Kildorrery, Co. Cork
“The Fascination of Trees”