**THE PLANTS THAT GROW IN BILLY’S GARDEN**

Seamus O’Brien, Master of the stunning planting at the National Botanic Gardens in Kilmacurragh Co Wicklow, is a loyal and long-term friend. Often, he has been my muse and expert guide on our myriad trips to the tree fern fields of Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia on which I have served as his willing wingman. There is little Seamus does not know about the sometimes-strange world of plants in which we frequently find ourselves.

Some time ago, I boldly invited Seamus to conduct an audit of the plants in our growing collection in Kells Bay. Typical of Seamus, he readily agreed and, in keeping with his generous spirit and total enthusiasm, he not only catalogued the plants but provided an appraisal of their setting and context within the gardens. So, what follows becomes more than a mere record of growth, it is an open invitation to increase your knowledge and improve your enjoyment of a visit to Kells Bay Gardens.

Thank you, Seamus, for these and for all your words of kindly wisdom. Read and enjoy.

**The Gardens at Kells Bay**

**A description of the garden, its history and plant collection**

by

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The gardens at Kells Bay possess an important collection of rare and tender trees and shrubs originating mainly from the Southern Hemisphere, particularly the warm-temperate and temperate regions of the Antipodes (Australia and New Zealand), South Africa, Argentina, Chile and the Andean areas of Peru.

All this, of course, is made possible by the warming influences of the Gulf Stream which creates an almost frost-free environment, and, coupled with County Kerry's abundant rainfall, enables the cultivation of taxa that are normally confined beneath glass elsewhere in Britain and Ireland.

Within Britain and Ireland, there are a handful of coastal regions where such benign growing conditions exist. In Britain for example, Cornwall, Devon and the west coast of Scotland are famed for their subtropical gardens, particularly establishments like Tresco on the Isles of Scilly, Tregrehan and Trebah in Cornwall and Logan and Inverewe in Scotland.

In Ireland, where the climate is generally warmer than that of Britain, several coastal regions with favoured climates exist; the Ards Peninsula in Co. Down, Howth and Malahide in Co. Dublin, the coastal regions of Co. Wicklow, West Cork, Kerry and Donegal are all good examples. Ireland's notable subtropical gardens are mainly centred in West Cork and Kerry and famous names include Ilnacullin, Derreen, Rossdohan, Glanleam and Kells, while on the east coast Mount Stewart, the Talbot Botanic Gardens, Earlscliffe, Mount Usher and Kilmacurragh, are all famous for their extensive collections of warm-temperate and half-hardy plants. Kerry is indisputably the mildest and most favoured region of Ireland in which to garden, though wind hurtling across the Atlantic Ocean is a constant factor and in winter can reach hurricane-like strengths. This necessitates the establishment of defensive shelterbelts using wind tolerant subjects like *Escallonia rubra* var. *macrantha*, *Fuchsia* 'Riccartonii', conifers such as *Cupressus macrocarpa*, *Pinus radiata* and *Pinus muricata*, and deciduous trees like *Acer pseudoplatanus* and *Fraxinus excelsior*, for example.

Once established, these shelterbelts provide enviable microclimates in which an exciting range of Southern Hemisphere and Mediterranean plants may be grown.

Kerry's high rainfall and relatively low light levels however, means the cultivation of succulents like the Canary Island aeoniums, South African aloes and New World agaves and furcraeas is difficult; many eventually rot and slowly decay over damp winter months. At Tresco Abbey Gardens on the Isles of Scilly, conditions are quite different, higher light levels, coupled with lower rainfall and sharply drained sandy soils combine to create perfect growing conditions for succulents normally confined to heated glasshouses and allowing trees like the New Zealand Christmas tree or pohutukawa, Metrosideros excelsa, to flower profusely.

The Kerry climate, thankfully has its benefits too and numerous plants grow better in south-west Kerry than in the gardens of Cornwall or the Scilly Isles. Tree ferns are a classic example. A brief wander through the grounds at Kells takes visitors through a primeval forest of the Tasmanian tree fern *Dicksonia antarctica*. I know of several places in Kerry where this species reproduces with such wild abandon that it has long left the bounds of gardens and demesnes, and indeed could be classed as a weed.

Around Glengarriff and Bantry Bay, the Chilean myrtle, *Luma apiculata* has become a worrying self-seeder, ousting native vegetation, whilst the giant rhubarb, *Gunnera tinctoria* is now classed as an invasive alien and efforts are being made to eliminate it from the Irish landscape. Foreign visitors to Cork and Kerry are fooled into believing that the roadside verges of *Corocomia* x *crocosmiiflora* (montbretia) and miles of *Fuchsia* hedges (*Fuchsia* 'Ricartonnii', *F. magellanica* and *F. magellanica* var. *gracilis*) are native. Not so, all are garden escapes, and examples of non-natives thriving in the West Cork-Kerry climate and a reminder that we should all keep a vigilant eye for invasive qualities in newly-introduced plants from the Southern Hemisphere and elsewhere.

**The early botanical collections at Kells**

It was Rowland Blennerhassett (1780-1854), a member of the prominent Kerry family of merchants and businessmen, who bought the lands at Kells in 1837, thus beginning the history of today's estate. There he built a small hunting lodge, naming it Holly Mount from the many ancient hollies in the rocky, hillside oak woods surrounding his new house. His grandson, Sir Rowland Ponsonby Blennerhassett (1850-1913), was born at Kells and extended the house and gardens. During his time, a collection of tender exotics plants began. He was also responsible for the construction of the Lady's Walled Garden and the network of pathways through the pleasure gardens.

Blennerhassett kept a town house at Hans Place, Chelsea (London) and would therefore have been quite familiar with the famous Chelsea Physic Gardens. Begun as an apothecary’s garden in 1673, the garden has long been famed for a unique city microclimate, which enables the cultivation of a wide range of tender exotics and no doubt it had an influence on Blennerhassetts choice of planting material for Kells.

Blennerhassett would also have had plenty of inspiration from the gardens of the landed estates in Kerry, such as Glanleam on Valentia Island, where Sir Peter Fitzgerald, the 19th Knight of Kerry (1808-1880), created Ireland's first truly subtropical garden. At Derreen, south of Kenmare, Henry Charles Keith Petty FitzMaurice, 5th Marquis of Lansdowne (1845-1927), followed suit, while on the rocky island of Garinish (not to be confused with the other Garinish – or Ilnacullin – at Glengarriff), Windham Thomas Wyndam Quin, 4th Earl of Dunraven (1841-1926) created a wild exotic garden sheltered by native oakwood. At Rossdohan, Samuel Heard (1835-1921) transformed a small tidal gorse-covered island into a magnificent rainforest, reminiscent of more southern lands.

Kells Bay Gardens is quintessentially a wild Robinsonian woodland garden, laid out and developed at a time when Victorian gardening in Britain and Ireland had reached its zenith. Plant hunting, by both private individuals and professional collectors employed by large commercial nurseries, was bringing back a flood of new exciting plants to our shores – Kells was created during a golden era of plant exploration. This new palette of exotic foliage plants allowed gardeners in the coastal regions of Ireland – particularly Kerry – to re-create rainforest-like jungles full of towering eucalypts, palms, tree ferns and towering cabbage trees. The garden at Kells is the result of the toil of almost 150 years of dedicated gardening, during which time it has matured to recreate a scene reminiscent of the lush, damp rainforests of north-west Tasmania.

**A Tour of the trees and shrubs at Kells Bay Gardens**

**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 stamenous 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, 19th 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 19th 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 understorey 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 19th 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. *Microsorum* *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 Botanic Gardens.

**The Primeval Forest**

The rather aptly-named primeval forest lies adjacent to the walled garden, from where, many years ago, the original plant of *Dicksonia antarctica* self-spored to create a rainforest-like scene. This wonderful tree fern, a native of Australia and Tasmania, is commonly planted in the milder coastal gardens of Britain and Ireland, though it is in Ireland that it thrives best, particularly in south-west Kerry where they create an unparalleled exotic scene, looking every bit as happy as they would in north-west Tasmania. Old tree ferns, like those at Kells, are truly noble, with soaring thick, fat trunks carrying a parasol of fronds up to 4m (13 ft) long. Early summer is a magical time in Kerry gardens when dozens of crozier-like young fronds emerge in shuttlecock fashion from the apex of the stout trunks. Tree ferns are 'living fossils', the material that formed coal fields millions of years ago. The lifelike dinosaurs, recently carved by Pieter Koning from fallen trees at Kells, are highly appropriate in the circumstances. In Tasmania, where they are called 'man ferns', *Dicksonia antartica* form gigantic specimens, growing beneath a canopy of blackwoods (*Acacia melanoxylon*) and the black sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*).

Several tree ferns from New Zealand have been recently planted in the primeval forest at Kells Bay beneath a canopy of oak, holly and Scot's pine - including the wheki-ponga, *Dicksonia fiberosa* and the rough tree fern or wheki, *Dicksonia squarrosa*. The former is rather tender and may succumb during hard winters such as those in 2010-'11, while the latter may be cut to ground level but re-sprout from underground rhizomes. Closely related and in the same family (Dicksoniaceae) is the South American *Lophosoria* *quadripinnata*, whose long elegant fronts are brilliantly silver on their undersides, in a similar fashion to the New Zealand silver tree fern, *Cyathea dealbata* (which also grows at Kells). *Lophosoria quadripinnata* is widely distributed in South America from Cuba to Chile. I've seen it in its native Chile where it forms sheets of green and silver beneath the sub-Antarctic Forest canopy. The king fern, *Todea barbara*, is a native of South Africa, Australia and New Zealand's North Island. In its native habitat, it slowly forms a trunk up to 3 m (10 ft) tall and is extremely long lived. For example, at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin in Dublin, there is a venerable specimen no less than four centuries old. *Blechnum nudum*, the Australian fishbone fern, is another recent introduction. One of the most abundant of the Australian ferns, its common name stems from the resemblance of the fertile fronds to fish bones.

**The Kells Bay Viewpoint**

As you wander on, stop for a moment to admire the sweeping views from the gardens across Dingle Bay with Mount Brandon in the distance. It's hard to miss the contrast between the lush cultivated garden with the Tasmanian *Acacia melanoxylon* in the foreground and the open exposed fields and lichen-encrusted stonewalls beyond. Sit on the bench for a moment and observe the surrounding vegetation. The loquat, *Eriobotrya japonica*, provides an exotic touch with its large bold leathery leaves. It rarely, if ever, sets fruits in Ireland and despite the specific epithet, it is not native to Japan, but is found truly wild in Central China.

Close-by, grows another fantastic foliage plant, *Drimys winteri* var. *chilensis*, a multi-stemmed evergreen tree that can grow to 15 m (49 ft) tall. Native to central Chile and commonly known as 'Winter's bark', it was Captain William Winter, who accompanied Sir Francis Drake to the Straits of Magellan in 1578, who first noticed that the bark (which contains high concentrations of vitamin C) acted as a powerful medicine against scurvy. It makes a beautiful sight in early summer when carrying broad umbels of ivory-white blossoms and the silvery undersides to the leaves are spectacular when caught on the wind. Alas, it is a carrier of *Phytopthera kernoviae*, one of the most serious tree diseases to have reached our shores in recent years and, as a result, is being removed from large botanical collections.

The most striking plant visible from the viewpoint is the Chilean wine palm, *Jubea chilensis.* Withits thick, fat trunk and head of feather-like fronds it has become an icon for Kells since its recent importation from Chile. It is apparently very hardy once established, a plant having grown out of doors at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in the late 19th century. Though once abundant in north-central Chile, this species is now threatened, since entire trees are felled for palm wine, which is reduced to produce honey. It is becoming more widely planted in sheltered Irish gardens but is painfully slow growing.

The sheltered areas surrounding the view point harbour some interesting native Irish ferns like *Hymenophyllum tunbrigense*, a filmy fern, known in Irish as *dallán coille*. Needing extreme levels of high humidity, in Victorian times its cultivation was confined to bell jars. At Kells however, it forms cushion-like mounds over rocks and scales its way high into the surrounding oak trees.

Close-by are several plants of the cycad-like *Blechnum tabulare*, a striking fern that is indigenous to sub-Saharan Africa. It occurs in the Cape, South Africa, including the famous Table Mountain from where its name originates – *tabulare* or table – the Table Mountain fern. A casual glance through this area of the garden at Kells leaves gardeners in colder climates in slight envy – tree ferns self-sporing in tens of thousands and behaving as though they were native to this favoured corner of Ireland.

**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 19th 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 18th 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 stamenous 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.

**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).

**The River Ramble**

Several ferns grow alongside this walk including the shuttlecock-like *Blechnum magellanicum* and the unaccountably rare *Blechnum cycadifolium* from Robinson Crusoe Island (part of the Juan Fernández Islands). Near it, growing in an amphitheatre of rock, are further specimens of the Chonta palm, *Juania australis* and *Thyrsopteris elegans (*an elegant tree fern), both of which are also endemics from the Juan Fernández Archepelago.

This sheltered walk possesses several fine trees including the original Victorian plantings of *Cryptomeria japonica* and a massive Monterey cypress, *Cupressus macrocarpa*. A little further on, visitors meet the exotic *Schefflera taiwaniana* (Edward Needham form), originating from the first ever introduction of the species by the Cornish plant hunter, the late Edward Needham. The Schefflera rubs shoulders with two Emei Shan (Mount Omei) endemics, *Aucuba omeiensis* and *Mahonia gracilipes*. I've been fortunate enough to climb Emei Shan, the sacred Buddhist Mountain in Sichuan province, China and to see both of these exciting garden plants. The Mount Omei *Aucuba* is a fantastic foliage plant, streets ahead of the more commonly encountered *Aucuba japonica*, forming small trees to 6m (20 ft) tall, and bearing leathery serrated leaves up to 30 cm (1 ft) long. *Mahonia gracilipes* is equally exciting, its pinnate leaves are polished silver beneath and the epimedium-like blossoms are purple. Helen Dillon grows the best specimen in Britain and Ireland in her famous Dublin Garden.

**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 dTobar, a lofty mountain that overshadows the Kells Bay area. The area opened in 2008 to enable the clearance of *Rhododendron* x *superponticum*, 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 arailoides* 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.

**Waterfall Way**

Moving on, we arrive at the waterfall, an enormous cascade of water over one of Kells Bay many cliff faces. Plants here are afforded protection from the ever-present winds by a wood of oak, holly, larch, Scot's pine and giant firs.

New Zealanders abound here like the Kauri pine, *Agathis australis*, a monkey-puzzle relative (Araucariaceae), once common on New Zealand's North Island and now all but eliminated. A few great giants survive today and are all that are left to remind us of the great forests that existed before Captain Cook’s arrival. The strange celery-topped pines grow here too including *Phyllocladus trichomanoides* var. *alpinus*, whose frond-like leaves are actually cladodes or flattened branchlets. They also extend into Tasmania, and Kells has several young trees of the Tasmanian endemic *Phyllocladus aspleniifolius*. Equally interesting is the low-growing conifer *Halocarpus bidwillii,* the bog or mountain pine. A member of the podocarp family (Podocarpaceae), it favours damp mountainous areas in its native New Zealand and is very common on the South Island, particularly on Arthur's Pass. Appropriately, the areas beneath are planted with more kiwi natives like the mountain astelia, *Astelia nervosa,* whose silvery leaves contrast well with the pinnate fronds of *Blechnum novae-zelandiae*, whose fronds may reach up to 2 m (6.5 ft) long.

Near the top of the waterfall, two species of delicate filmy fern from New Zealand and Australia are thriving. *Leptopteris hymenophylloides*, the single crepe fern and *Leptopteris superba,* the Prince of Wales feathers, are allied to the native filmy ferns Hymenophyllum *tunbrigense* already growing at Kells. They are exacting in their needs and generally difficult to grow in drier areas.

**The Bog Walk**

From the waterfall, visitors continue their way onto the Big Walk where they meet a young King Billy pine, *Athrotaxis selaginoides,* a Tasmanian endemic named for William Lanne (also known as King Billy or William Laney), who was the last full-blooded Tasmanian aboriginal man. Lanne died in 1869, and because of his scientific interest, several parts of his body were stolen while in a morgue, and again after his burial, a macabre ending to an aboriginal race. His namesake, the King Billy pine is facing an equally bleak future, as over one third of its native habitat was lost due to fires during the 20th century, a sad fate for this noble, long-lived tree.

Thus concludes our tour of Kells Bay Gardens. The selection of plants in this account is purely the choice of the author and it is by no means a comprehensive catalogue of the entire collection. Gardens are changing evolving places and no doubt a tour in twenty years’ time will focus a quite different selection of taxa, though I hope those mentioned here give a good impression of the rarity of this exciting and ever-expanding exotic collection. Moreover, Kells is a place to return to time and time again. It's an old garden, given a new lease of life. Many of the plants mentioned are relatively young and it will be worth returning on a frequent basis to watch them grow to maturity and see what new discoveries join them.

Enjoy.

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National Botanic Gardens, Kilmacurragh, Kilbride, Co Wicklow