

## Reflections on the History of Irish Gardening: Thelma Swash Memorial Lecture<sup>1</sup>

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In 1995, was the bicentenary of the founding of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, which gave many of us at the Gardens the excuse to reflect upon the history of Irish horticulture and on Glasnevin's place in that history.

History is sometimes seen as the story of influences from abroad and this approach can certainly be applied to the history of gardening in Ireland. The Romans, as far as we know, didn't get to Ireland, or if they did they just came over for occasional forays, so we wouldn't expect any Roman influences in early Ireland. The first wave of invaders of which we have any record is that of the Vikings and, from archaeological investigations, we know that gardening was not high on their agenda although fruit was gathered wild from the surrounding countryside.

A monastic tradition has existed in Ireland since early Christian times and continued after the Norman invasion. There is evidence that the Normans were responsible for introducing a large number of garden plants, and wild plants which are found significantly near Norman towns, castles, and monasteries. Wallflowers, mallow, good King Henry, wall pellitory, hemlock, milk thistle, and henbane are all found with remarkable regularity near Norman habitations. On the limestone rocks by the great buildings of the Rock of Cashel, wild parsley is found. This is not a native Irish plant. It doesn't occur in many other places throughout Ireland, is generally associated with Norman habitations, and its introduction must be attributed to them. Yellow wallflowers grow on the old town walls of Drogheda.

Following excavations at Trim Castle, mallow and black horehound came up all over the excavation site. Many of these plants have a medicinal value and give little indication of decorative gardening by the Normans. For indications of a move in that direction we have to jump a few centuries. The abolition of the monasteries by Henry VIII is, generally speaking, considered to have been an unfriendly act. However, inquisitions taken during his reign are useful and show that the gardens of the monasteries were about an acre in extent. Their main function was to provide medicinal herbs and vegetables. There must have been some development of gardening in Ireland in Elizabethan times. Although there is controversy about the original introduction of the potato we do know use of the potato spread faster in Ireland than in England. In 1663 Robert Boyle, the Earl of Cork, had a bag of potatoes sent to him in London by his Irish gardener to show to members of the Royal Society, suggesting that they were a novelty in England. We also know that Irish emigrants later introduced the potato to Virginia. The often quoted paper by Joseph Walker, published in 1790 on the history of gardening in Ireland, attributes the introduction of edible cherries to Walter Raleigh. Raleigh is also supposed to have introduced a sweet smelling yellow wallflower from the Azores.

The Seventeenth century was one of great political upheaval in Ireland with many changes of land ownership not conducive to such a peaceful pursuit as gardening. However, following the Battle of the Boyne a century of relative peace was

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<sup>1</sup>This is an abridged version of Donal Synnott's lecture.

established. The end of the 17th century brought a great influx of Protestant refugees and settlers to Ireland. Palatines, Bavarians, Walloons, and English Quakers came to live here. They settled in places that the late Sheila Pim described as "still characterised by a curious neatness". Because of our favourable climate, the range of plants from all parts of the world grown in Ireland is very extensive. That tradition of naturalising exotic plants began, it is believed, with Sir Arthur Rawdon of Moira in County Down. He grew plants from North America such as *Robinia pseudacacia* and *Yucca filamentosa* for the first time here.

The tradition of growing decorative flowers we have to attribute mainly to the Dutch. They, like the French, were interested in evergreens and topiary, but they also extended greatly our interest in carnations, pinks, tulips, anemones, ranunculus, hyacinths, auriculas, and polyanthus. Artificial hybridisation was another century away but gardeners were selecting seedlings and extending greatly the range of decorative plants in cultivation. Fashion in plants is a curious thing. It is as fickle as the fashion in garden ornament. We know that plants go out of fashion or favour from overuse or the wrong kind of use. Discerning gardeners nowadays do not plant *Lonicera nitida* nor *Populus x candicans* 'Aurora'. Yet these are widely planted by naive or independent-minded gardeners. *Fuchsia magellanica* has not suffered the same ignominy. Who was it who first decided that *P. x candicans* 'Aurora' was not for by the discerning gardener? Was this consensus plucked out of the air or did it have a leader in the formation of such an opinion? There is no accounting for tastes, as much tastes in garden plants as in garden ornament. We must be grateful that people have chosen and choose to go their separate ways.

I suspect that in gardening, as in other walks of life, strong characters really have great influence on what the rest of us choose to believe. Charles Nelson in *The Brightest Jewel* quotes an anecdote from Sir Frederick Moore. When Moore was just 22 years old he became Curator of the Glasnevin Botanic Gardens and, although his appointment was supported by the majority of people who knew him, there was some concern that such a young man would not be able to do the job. So a self-appointed horticultural tribunal comprised of John Bennett Coe of Nenagh, Edward Woodall from Scarborough, and William Edward Gumbledon, the senior member of the party — escribed by Dr. Nelson as "an opinionated gentleman who had developed his passion for gardening only a decade earlier" — came to visit Moore at Glasnevin and to see if he was up to the job. Sir Frederick Moore recalled the episode nearly 60 years later: "It was with much trepidation that I started to take them around the garden, for three more dissimilar men could scarcely have been brought together and trouble soon began."

"In the Aquatic House Mr. Gumbledon took me to task severely for my pronunciation of a plant, emphasising his remarks by banging his umbrella on the flags. Mr. Woodall wanted to see the orchids. Mr. Gumbledon wanted to see the florists flowers out of doors. Mr. Bennett Coe was willing to go anywhere and kept the peace between the other two. In front of the Curvilinear Range Mr. Gumbledon denounced a plant as a 'tush' plant, his term for any plant he did not like, and proceeded to beat it to bits with his umbrella. I was too timid to do more than mildly remonstrate and bemoan the loss of a recently arrived plant".

Gumbledon was later to make amends by donating his valuable collection of illustrated floras to the library at Glasnevin.

William Robinson was another self-opinionated Irishman who had a great influ-



ence on the progress of gardening, mainly through his writings but also through the force of his personality. It seems as if Robinson didn't suffer fools gladly but I suspect his definition of a fool was anyone who did not share his own views. I have avoided mentioning the names of William Henry Harvey, Patrick Browne, Ninian Niven, the Drummonds, J.C. Lyons, Daniel Robertson, Robert Lloyd Praeger, or Augustine Henry; or the important places like the Burren, Powerscourt, Mounts Usher and Stewart, Birr Castle, etc., in this tiptoeing through the tulips of the history of Irish gardening. The daily practitioners of the art of gardening are as important as the great and enduring names.

Let us listen to the advice of a father to his 18-year-old son who is about to embark on a career in gardening at Glasnevin in 1898. William Parnell, Foreman at Glasnevin, wrote:

“My dear son Fred, I have received your note stating willingness to accept employment in the gardens here so that you may have the opportunity of learning the business. I will write down a few plain rules for your guidance[...] 1st as to God[....] 2nd to your parents[...] 3rd personal appearance[...] 4th when at work. Do it quickly and well, not putting over time at it, nor slauming it over in a hurry and half done. Attend to small details and be always studying the best way of doing it. Never be found standing gossiping or smoking (a dirty unnecessary habit) and while civil and friendly to all, make no close friendships unless with a worthy man. 5th leisure hours[...] 6th Sundays[...] 7th If admitted as you may be on next Thursday morn, your commencing pay will be eight shillings a week, to be raised as circumstances permit and as your conduct deserves. The half of this sum goes to your mother, 2/6 to be put up for clothes. The remainder is to be left in my hands for emergency calls such as tram fare, holidays calls, and such like. I don't want a penny of your earnings for myself. You will thus have 6d each week for pocket money to be increased as your wages advance. I would not like you to have more at present and if you give up the dirty habit of smoking you wont have to spend your pennies on cigarettes or tobacco. And now I have said all I have to say at present.”

“Don't throw this letter away and call it a long sermon. Read it now and then and mind it. Hereafter you will find that every word of it was needed. Your affectionate Father, W. Parnell.”

The letter was preserved by the Parnell family and donated by Fred's son, Jack, last year for Glasnevin's archives.

Gardening is as much about personalities, individuals, and eccentrics as it is about great movements influencing taste and practice. Although the great institutions and great gardens, the plant collectors and writers about plants, do influence what we do and what we plant, the garden is, in the end, a great independent republic where we can be free of public tastes and influences — a kingdom where we are absolute masters.

Such freedom has given us 18th and 19th century garden features such as clipped hedges and topiary, Victorian frivolities like the chain-tent pergola from Glasnevin and some features of the flower garden like the great herbaceous border, carpet bedding, and the essential spring and summer bedding of public parks which are the result of many centuries of changes and influences in gardening and gardening tastes. It has given us the great glasshouses which were built in Ireland, especially those at Glasnevin.

Among the outstanding characters in the history of Irish gardening is David

Moore, who was responsible for most of the glasshouses which we have at Glasnevin and for many of the plants in the collections of Irish gardens. During his time at Glasnevin, from 1838 until his death in 1879, he introduced many thousands of plants from various parts of the world.

David Moore did a great deal to persuade the Royal Dublin Society to build and expand the glasshouses at Glasnevin. The greatest of these projects was the building of the Curvilinear Range which was mainly the work of Richard Turner. It was begun in 1843, and completed in its first phase in 1848. A second phase was built in 1868. A major restoration of this glasshouse has just been completed by the Office of Public Works. The Great Palm House at Glasnevin is a later building. It was supplied by Boyds of Paisley in Scotland and was built in a very short time in 1884, replacing a wooden structure which had fallen down in a gale force wind. It too is in need of some serious restoration.

Today, garden tourism is very important for the Irish economy, gardening now brings more people to Ireland than golf does. Many great Irish gardens are being restored with grants partially funded from the E.U. Thanks to the diligence and skill of plant propagators the range of good and interesting garden plants is being dramatically extended and made available to a wider public. All of this activity is of course promoting gardening within Ireland as well as attracting more people to the country from abroad. The future looks bright.