the cultivator

July/August 2019
The newsletter for Master Gardeners serving
Champaign, Ford, Iroquois, and Vermilion Counties

ILLINOIS
Extension

COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURAL, CONSUMER & ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

A "Magical Woodland"

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During the month of May 2011, I traveled with 54 British members of the Lakeland Horticulture Society (Windermere, England) to the highlands of Northwest Scotland. It was an eight-day tour of a dozen gardens, starting near Ullapool, then to the Isle of Skye located in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland. The gardens of Dunvegan Castle, situated on a rocky outcrop by the sea on the west coast of the Isle of Skye, was our last garden on the itinerary for the Isle.

A cold front with high winds was moving towards the island as we left Dunvegan Castle. Snow was forecast as we crossed the narrow Strait of Loch Alsh via the Skye bridge at Kyleakin, linking the east coast of the Isle to the mainland. We left the upper highlands where sheer, rocky, granite crags; fast streams cutting through gullies; and bright-yellow, prickly, gorse bushes dominated the landscape that now was shrouded in darkening clouds. Inland, we headed—towards warmer weather and a chance of sunshine—to Pitlochry, in the heart of Scotland. A late afternoon visit to Cluny House Gardens located nearby in Aberfeldy, Perthsire was on the afternoon itinerary.

The small town of Aberfeldy, located along the river Tey, lies in a U-shaped valley with scenic peaks of the Perthshire Highlands as a backdrop to farms with spring-tilled land and gentle, rolling pastures where sheep and cattle were grazing. As our coach crossed over the Tey bridge, there was a light drizzle from the gray clouds that followed us that afternoon, yet a glint of sunlight straight ahead towards our destination of Cluny House Gardens.

The coach could not navigate the narrow woodland lane that led into the garden, so we walked the half mile to the entrance. Native woodland Scottish bluebells were growing in profusion against stone moss walls and surrounded the welcome sign of Cluny House Gardens. An open grassland habitat just inside the entrance was planted with varieties of native wild plants.

The sky was overcast with a threat of impending rain. We stood in a circle on the manicured lawn outside the stone country home where our host, John Mattingley, and his wife, Wendy, live and have cared for the nearby garden since 1987. John told us the stories of the garden and the intrepid Scottish plant explorers connected to the foundation of the garden. Wendy's parents, Bobby (a veterinary surgeon with an interest in alpines and Himalayan plants) and Betty Masterton were the original creators of the garden. They received 400 seed packets in 1950 from their friend and Scottish plant explorer, George Sheriff, and his Englishman partner, Frank Ludlow, to start their garden on land with a few conifer, oak, and beech trees plus the two distinguished Wellingtonias.

Native bluebells


Woodland garden entrance


Meconopsis


Primula

The lawn sloped steeply into the woods where trees overhead provided an umbrella from a hard rain. As I entered the shade, a vibrant showcase of colorful Himalayan woodland plants with a mix of North American natives was a surprise to me, for a forest garden.

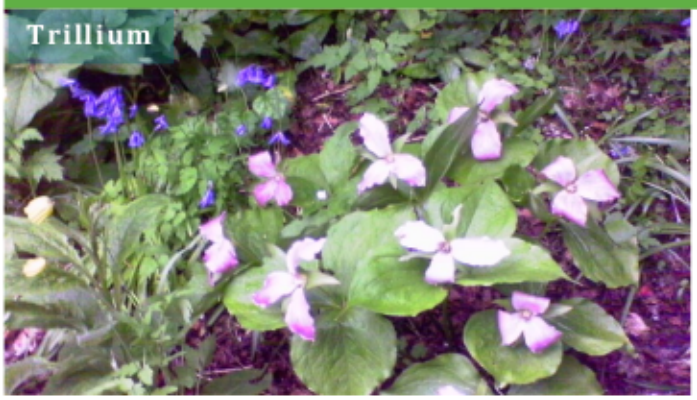
The seeds from the Sheriff-Ludlow 1949 expedition to Bhutan included several varieties of *Meconopsis napaulensis*, a difficult to grow but beautiful Himalayan poppy, with colors of yellow, red, and blue. The pure blue variety of *Meconopsis* poppy (*Meconopsis grandis)* added a burst of color for a May woodland garden.

Included in the seed packets were several varieties of Asiatic primulas, which would be difficult to grow in cultivation. Many of the seeds collected by Sheriff and Ludlow came from an altitude of 10,000 to 14,000 feet. The maritime climate at Cluny—moderate rainfall, the altitude of Strathtay Valley, and a light, sandy, free-draining, slightly acidic soil—imitates the origins of these beautiful poppies and primulas.

Several intrepid Scottish plant hunters contributed indirectly to the garden. Archibald Menzies was born near Aberfeldy. The Western Red Cedar and Nootka cypress, native to the Pacific northwest of America, are examples of species that he obtained on his expeditions in the late 1700's and introduced to Great Britain. These species were growing in the woods at Cluny House Garden. David Douglas, who spent his early years near Perth, exploring the natural world rather than learning his school books, introduced several varieties of fir trees to Great Britain in 1830 from his North American travels. The Douglas fir, which bears his name, is among several of these fir trees that are a part of Cluny's long-standing forest.


Paeonia

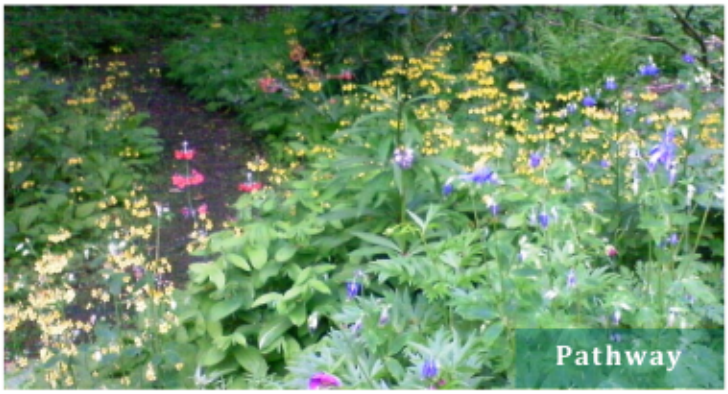
The Scotland's "Indiana Jones" plant hunter, George Forrest, introduced 1200 new species to Great Britain during his 1904-1932 travels to Yunnan in Western China, upper Burma, eastern Tibet, and Sichuan province. Examples seen in the forest garden were the *Paeonia delavay* whose rich-red, single-cupped flowers on the deciduous, multi-stemmed shrubs added splotches of color in the woods in mid-May. Also in bloom were numerous varieties and colors of primula; the orange and yellow candelabra were prolific, spilling onto the gravel paths.


Trillium


Rhododendron

The striped spathes of the cobra lilies were in their place, the boggy areas of the garden. Large clumps of trilliums in white, red, and maroon covered the woodland ground. The rhododendron bushes and scented azaleas in bright pinks, white, and red added an understudy of color in the spring forest. The Tibetan Cherry tree (*Prunus serrula tibetica*) with red peeling bark and the *Abies Forrestii*, a conifer whose only origin was China (and currently on the list of threatened species) was a George Forrest introduction also.

Cluny House Gardens is situated on a hillside 600 feet above the River Tay, so the defined pathways in the garden follow the natural terrain—steep in many places, so steps were built directly into the embankments. Self-sown seedlings were left to grow alongside the trails, so we were asked to watch our step and stay on the paths. Constant hand weeding allowed self-sown seedlings to establish and multiply naturally.


Pathway

Large branches or trees that come down in the forest are covered with 2" leaf mold plus 2" of compost, and new beds are allowed to grow through. When a weed is pulled, the ground is then covered with leaf mold, which reduces the light to prevent germination and additional weeds. All weeds are collected and left to decompose for two years. The final result is a nitrogen rich compost used in the garden borders. For additional weed suppression and nutrients, a layer of leaf mold is added on top of the compost.

The use of leaf mold (a cold composting process) as soil amendment or conditioner is an example of how woodland plant life is maintained without the use of chemicals. Large piles of leaves collected in November and December from the paths and gravel sit for three years in a moist environment decomposing with the help of invertebrates and bacteria. By then the compost will be moist and crumbly with beneficial bacteria and earthworms. It is used in the garden as mulch or worked into the soil to improve its water holding capacity. The addition of trace minerals and micronutrients to the soil is an additional benefit. Using the home-produced leaf mold allows many woodland plants to naturalize throughout the garden. Another significant component in the organic

processes are the dozens of fungi identified in these woods, important in recycling dead material to the soil in a form that can be reused.

The care of wildlife was a personal feature in this garden. Bird feeders and nest boxes occupied by Great and Blue Tits could be found placed throughout the garden as well as seed and berry-bearing plants. Other birds that have made a home in the garden include Mistle thrush, Garden warblers, Spotted Flycatcher, Greenfinches, Treecreepers and Blackcaps. It has been reported that approximately 100 different species of birds have visited or made their home the garden.

In Britain, due to the proliferation of the American gray squirrel, the native Red squirrels are threatened. At the garden, the Red squirrels are well taken care of and thrive, being fed pine nuts, hazelnuts, peanuts, and apples. Natural food sources that the squirrels find in the garden are tree blossoms, acer seeds, acorns, and even fungi. Two giant Redwood trees (one with a British record girth of 36 feet), are used by the Red squirrels as a highway through the garden; feeding boxes were at those trees.


Redwood

It is believed that those two giant Redwoods, now over 135 feet tall and 150 plus years in age, originated when John Matthews, a botanist from Perthshire, sent seeds of the sequoia from the Sierra Nevada region of Calaveras County, California, to his father in Gourdiehall, Perthshire in 1853. The British wanted the sequoia named the Wellington, after the Duke of Wellington. The American's wanted to name it Washingtonia, after their first president. After much debate, it was named the *Sequoiadendron giganteum.* In Britain though, the common name, Wellingtonia is still used.

The rain subsided by the time I finished walking the pathways in a garden that had been an unexpected delight, with bright colors of azalea bushes, Himalayan poppies, and masses of the subtle, two-toned, soft-blue and white columbine (*Aquilegia flabellata*) native to Japan. Throughout the 6 acres of woods, the Royal (*Osmunda regalis*) and Ostrich (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) ferns served their traditional role as mainstays in a woodland setting.

We departed the garden in the late afternoon sunshine, carrying potted plants purchased from Cluny. Traveling back to Pitlochry on the country road, I could see anglers in the clear river, fly-fishing for brown trout. River rafters were taking advantage of the break in the rain. Pheasants were abundant in the pastures where horses grazed. Lilacs grew along the fence line with fragrant spring plumes of dark purple, white, and lavender. When we arrived at Cluny House Gardens, the sign welcomed visitors to a "Magical Garden." As I traveled away from the mid-May spring garden, I added "Exquisite."


Columbine