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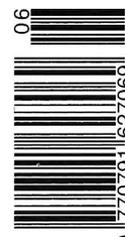
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writes about a
touch of orange
amid the blue



FRANCES MACDONALD
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A sensory delight

The garden of Ballycommane House in West Cork is a wonderfully stimulating experience for all the senses with a sub-tropical twist, combining a captivating collection of scented and edible plants with exotic flora from the Azores and southern hemisphere, as **Shirley Lanigan** recounts

On a back road out of the village of Durrus is Ballycommane House and Garden. Andy Stieglitz and Ingolf Jungmann have been working on this two-acre garden for fifteen years. On a recent visit, they told me how their exotic West Cork garden came about. “We lived in a Frankfurt apartment for twenty years,” said Andy. “But we had an escape, an allotment. The German climate though! Too hot during summertime and freezing in winter. For work we travelled. We saw many different countries and thought it would be better to garden in one of them. We loved Spain — nice people, but too far away. Sardinia was hot and dry. We went to the Azores and we were excited — enough rain but in the middle of the ocean.”

Andy is a writer and had written a walking guide to Ireland. They fell for West Cork and hunted for two years before finding Ballycommane, deserted and run down. “We wanted to create a garden rather than buy an existing one, so this felt right,” said Ingolf. They engaged neighbours to repair the house while they got to work on the garden during a series of holidays. “There were some laughs at that! In 2006 we ordered two hundred bare root trees and shrubs from Future Forests. The lady asked, ‘do you know how many that is?’ But we were so eager. It was April and warm and dry. We worked day and night with torches. She was right though. We lost a lot. That first year was hard.”

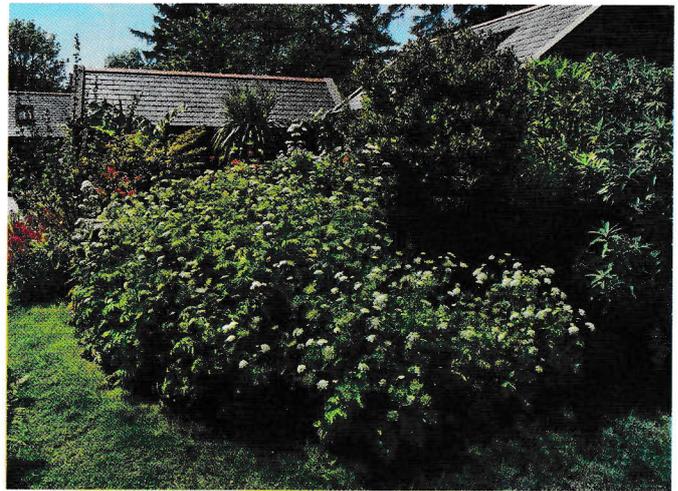


The ornamental giant rhubarb, *Gunnera manicata*, with its huge leaves and behind it, the swamp cypress, *Taxodium distichum*, both thrive in damp conditions

As we spoke, I admired a sizeable *Nothofagus dombeyi* planted thirteen years ago as a sapling. It is now over four metres tall. Growth here is considerable and constant. “In Germany it stops at the end of October and starts in March.” Ingolf said, “I would see growth between Christmas and Easter when we were coming for holidays.” When it came to exotic plants he continued: “We thought, West Cork — mild — and then we spent two cold winters and lost ten per cent of our plants. It’s not as sub-tropical as we thought. We are at the bottom of a hill in a frost pocket.”

The garden, then called ‘The Pines’, had some conifers and a paddock to the front of the house. They would remove these only as their own plants matured. “We had to learn about the land. The ground was acid and boggy. A layer of clay underneath stops water draining away. Turf was cut here. When we started, we did what we would have done in Germany, and planted into the ground. But it was too wet.” So, they put in drainage pipes and plant on mounds. The work has paid off.

They may not have moved to the Azores but having fallen for the islands’ flora they brought much of it to Cork. At the front of the house where once there was a view into the distance, now there are groves of tall shrubs and trees. We stopped at a four-metre *Prunus lusitanica* subsp. *azorica*, grown from a seed from the Azores. Beside it is another unusual plant, *Picconia azorica*, with white scented flowers and black berries. A tall *Arbutus unedo* almost wilts under the weight of flower and Andy said that the hibiscus sheltered underneath, reliably flowers at the end of September.



Chaerophyllum azoricum

We admired pink, unknown West Cork roses and *Indigofera tinctoria*, which also flowers in late summer. In the scrum, tender *Euryops pectinatus* ‘Sonnenschein’ nudges up against tough old *Sedum spectabile*, rosemary, *Ajuga reptans* and agapanthus. Among the natives, harts’ tongue fern and scores of different mosses cloak the stones holding the beds in. Rough paved paths weave under and between specimens of vanilla-scented *Azara microphylla* and yellow *Azara dentata* while *Camellia sasanqua* ‘Plantation Pink’, *Daphne*



Stone paths, edged with moss-covered stones weave beneath and between specimen trees and shrubs

bholua 'Jacqueline Postill', *Philadelphus* 'Belle Étoile' and *Callistemon pallidus* deliver a scent relay through the year.

We think of lilac as a fleeting sort of flowering shrub but *Syringa komarowii* ssp. *reflexa* is compact, with an excellent shape and handsome stems. The cinnamon stick trunks of *Luma apiculata* are a perfect foil to its pale branches. *Cornus mas* feeds the bees early in the year and *Cornus capitata* is good all year. We walked beneath the velvety under-leaves of *Rhododendron macabeum*, past yellow *Paeonia delavayi* var. *lutea* and an ancient looking, but teenage *Magnolia stellata*. Southern hemisphere plants include Tasmanians like *Cyathea cooperi*, *Dicksonia antarctica* and *Prostanthera rotundifolia*. "Cyathea cooperi is tender but it's sheltered here," Andy said. Under the shelter of a fine *Leptospermum scoparium*, we stopped to taste *Ugni molinae* berries and sniffed the citrus-scented *Diosma ericoides*. There are runs of London pride too: "We were told that it's St Patrick's cabbage here," said Ingolf. *Helleborus orientalis* blooms away in winter and later there are wild garlic carpets. A useful Azorean, *Scabiosa nitens*, carries pink flowers for most of the year.

The rare and special are everywhere, from *Viburnum erubescens* var. *gracilipes*, whose



The Bronze Age burial monument with standing stones

white panicles transform into red berries. They grew their *Acacia melanoxylon* and *Myrsine africana* from seed. The evergreen myrsine contrasts well with red *Loropetalum*. Meanwhile pink tinged *Correa* 'Marian's Marvel' sits well in a sea of *Duchesnea indica*. "We like to surprise our visitors with edible plants like those mock strawberries. They

cover the ground, flowering in spring for the bees and then we get fruits."

Good growth can be problematic: They pointed to a mahonia bumping into *Trochodendron aralioides*. Behind the two was a specimen of *Laurus azorica*. The debate about which to keep is ongoing. In the space-taking stakes, *Hydrangea aspera*



View of a mixed border with yellow day lilies, flaming red crocosmias and pale yellow evening primrose whose flowers fill the air with their sweet perfume. The exotic foliage of a banana plant provides a contrasting focal point



A collection of potted plants provide seasonal colour and interest close to the house with red valerian, *Centranthus ruber*, in the foreground

'Anthony Bullivant' is allowed to sprawl while its neighbour, *Euphorbia mellifera* is too sprawling for Ingolf. He prefers *Euphorbia stygiana*, a compact Azorean that also attracts bees. As does the heavily flowering *Olearia x scilloniensis*.

Hedges of blue lace-cap hydrangeas further shelter tender plants like *Boronia*

heterophylla, a citrus family shrub with crimson bell flowers. I love that so many plants here are to be eaten or sniffed: *Myrtus communis* delivers both scented flowers and berries for use in stews. Then there was what Andy called "the peanut butter shrub", *Clerodendrum trichotomum*, with leaves I could eat. "We have a visually impaired

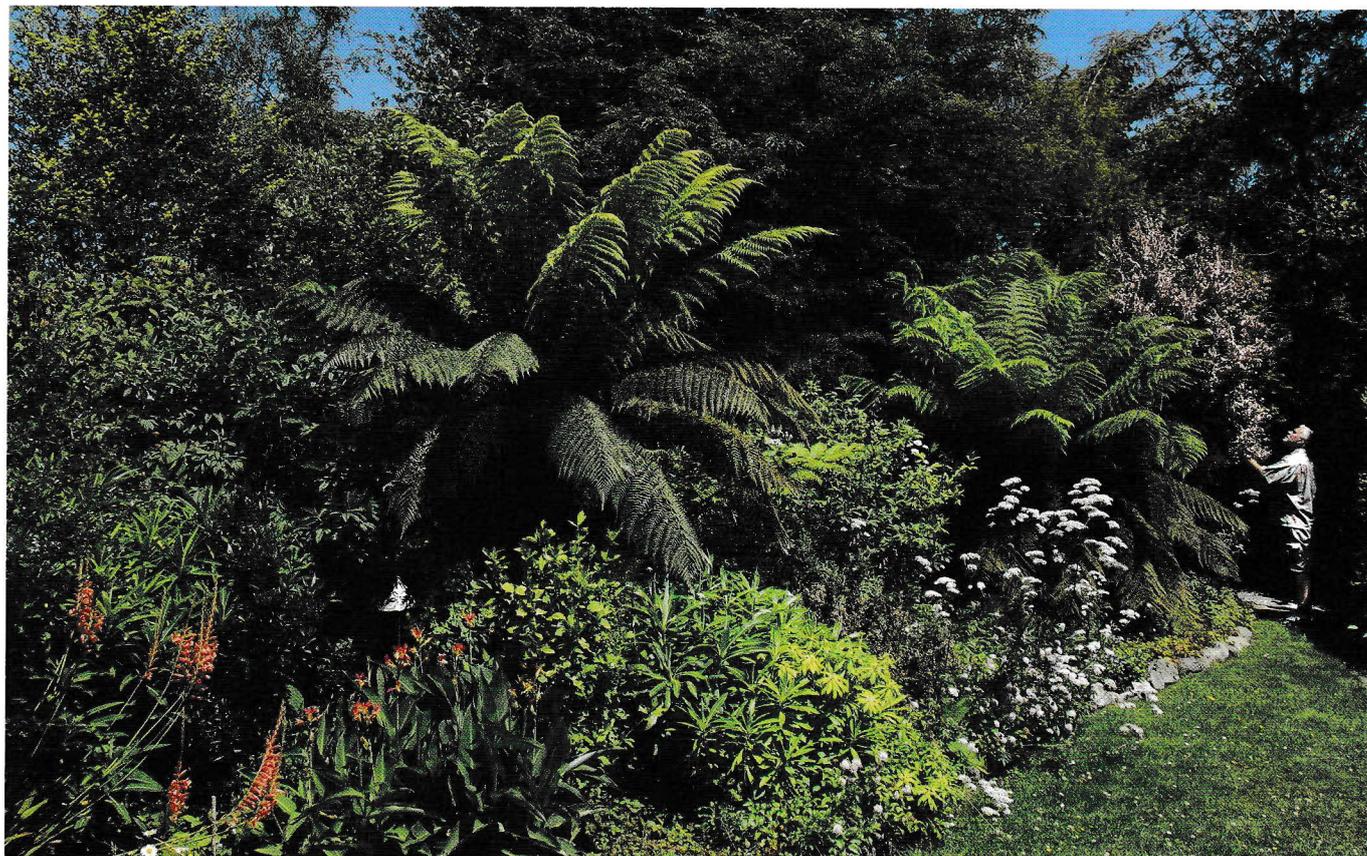
friend. We were so inspired by the very different route she took through the place that we developed a trail for visually impaired people."

Two fig trees that came as cuttings from Germany are their pride and joy, with plentiful, tasty fruit. "European visitors are always surprised to see figs," Ingolf said. Those visitors also love *Leycesteria formosa*: "The berries are sweet, but you have to wait until they are black. Caramel schwap, the Germans call it." This was turning into a feast of a walk.

Eucalyptus viminalis, taller than the house, is a favourite of koala bears in its native Australia. "We planted it fourteen years ago. It died in the 2010 winter and when new shoots came up we cut them all back except this one," said Andy.

"We lost our other eucalyptus. They have a reputation for fast growing, but they grew faster than their roots." Plants that cannot survive the mildest Irish winter, are the potted Azorean dragon trees or *Dracaena draco*, on the gravel apron in front of the house. *Myrica faya* or fire trees, also in containers, live in the yard. They store both in the old piggery over winter.

Underlying damp conditions are evident in a healthy stand of *Gunnera manicata* and



Tree ferns combine with watsonias, hedychiums, euphorbias and other plants of southern hemisphere and Azorean origins to create this exotic-looking border



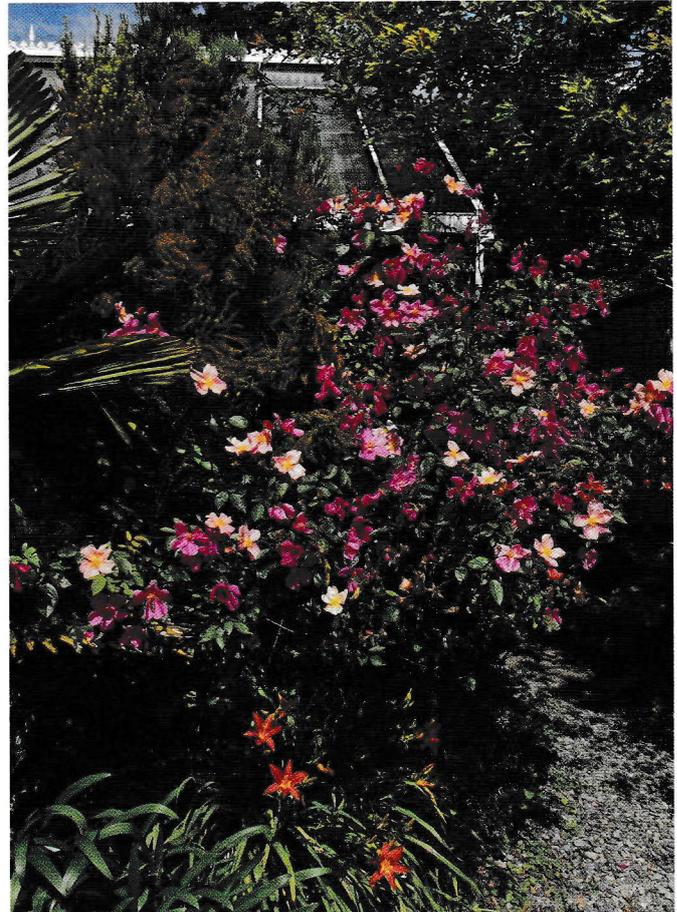
Leontodon rigens or rigid hawkbit from the Azores

a thriving *Taxodium distichum*, the aptly named swamp cypress, and a natural pond. Regarding the bamboo perched on its island, Andy smiled: "It can't spread anywhere!" Eight years ago, they bought a parcel of better drained land to the rear of the house, the original farm potato field. "We were looking for more space. We were so ready for it!" Ingolf laughed. New field acquired, the plant collection grew.

In the greenhouse, we looked at tender *Persea indica*, a miniature fruiting avocado, alongside strelitzia, banana, datura and *Veltheimia capensis*, a flowering bulb like a giant hyacinth. We also looked at *Dracaena cinnabari*, the dragon blood tree whose sap turns red and is used for dying wood and *Melaleuca alternifolia*, the Australian tea tree, with leaves that appear spiny but are soft and feathery. The olive tree entwined in jasmine, has almost run out of space in here. They raise annuals in the greenhouse too. Finally, the tangy *Syzygium paniculatum* berries, fruit of another Antipodean, had to be tried.

Outside, the culinary tour took in *Zanthoxylum piperitum*, or Japanese pepper bush, with sweet berries and aromatic leaves. Apart from edibles, an *Acer griseum* stood out for its unusual form of peeling trunk. They explained that *Buddleja globosa* next door is a mother plant used for cuttings. Underneath, a thriving spread of blue and white camassia compliments both.

I noticed a gothic-looking label marking *Staphylea pinnata*, or bladder nut. They are friends of the Frankfurt Botanic Garden, from which they bought these grand old labels. Out on the lawn, we walked between two weeping parrotias. "We wanted *Parrotia persica*, but we got these weeping ones by mistake." The mistake was welcome. Sunshine filtered through the leaves of *Cotinus* 'Grace' grown over mounds of epimedium. *Hydrangea involucrata* 'Tokado Yama' with semi-double white flowers is gorgeous in late summer, while *Calycanthus x raulstonii* 'Hartlage Wine' shows off earlier in the



The China rose, *Rosa x odorata* 'Mutabilis' with multi-coloured flowers

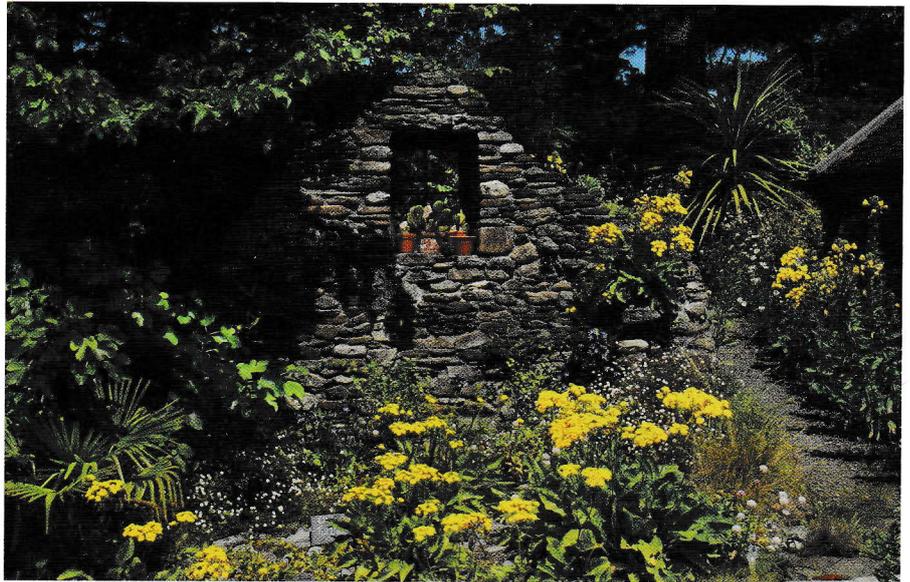
year. “It likes full sun,” said Ingolf. As does the dainty *Prunus incisa* ‘Kojono-mai’. Two fifteen-year-old tulip trees from the Frankfurt Botanics, have not yet flowered so *Paeonia* ‘Buckeye Belle’ and hemerocallis supply the colour here in competition with showy, yellow flowering Azorean *Leontodon rigens*. We would see more of this in the Azorean bed on a sunny hill by the summerhouse.

Looking at the *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*, talk turned to its scent: “In Germany we call it the gingerbread tree. You get the smell of home baking,” said Andy. As we studied a free-standing *Decaisnea fargesii*, they told me that the jelly from the seed pods is edible. It tastes like watermelon. The *Artemisia abrotanum* or cola plant grows here too. “A visitor who smelled it said ‘It’s not Coke. It’s Pepsi’.”

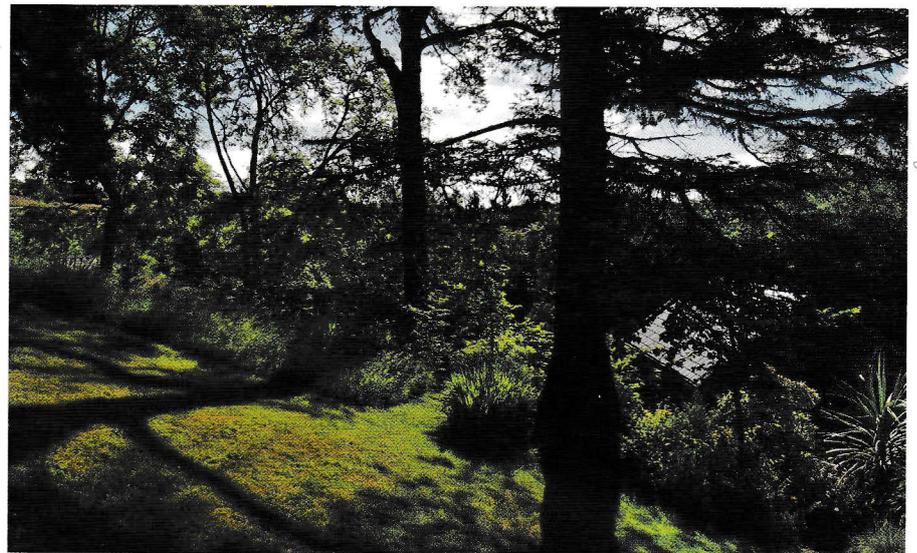
The standing stone in the bed was placed “to distract the eye”. Today it supports *Rosa* ‘Zéphirine Drouhin’. We passed *Cryptomeria japonica*. In the Azores, it is used for furniture, which then smells beautifully of pine. Close by, they are proud of the *Acer rubescens* with vivid red stalks, another Frankfurt Botanics seedling. Last year they were able to return seed.

We walked through the wood under a baby giant redwood with clumps of *Francoa sonchifolia*, watsonia and foxgloves underneath, past *Davidia involucrata* and *Saxegothea conspicua* from Chile. A climbing evergreen *Hydrangea seemannii* scrambled up its trunk. In the lower storey, *Viburnum furcatum* has showy leaves that turn red in autumn, contrasting with a neighbouring green *Cunninghamia lanceolata*.

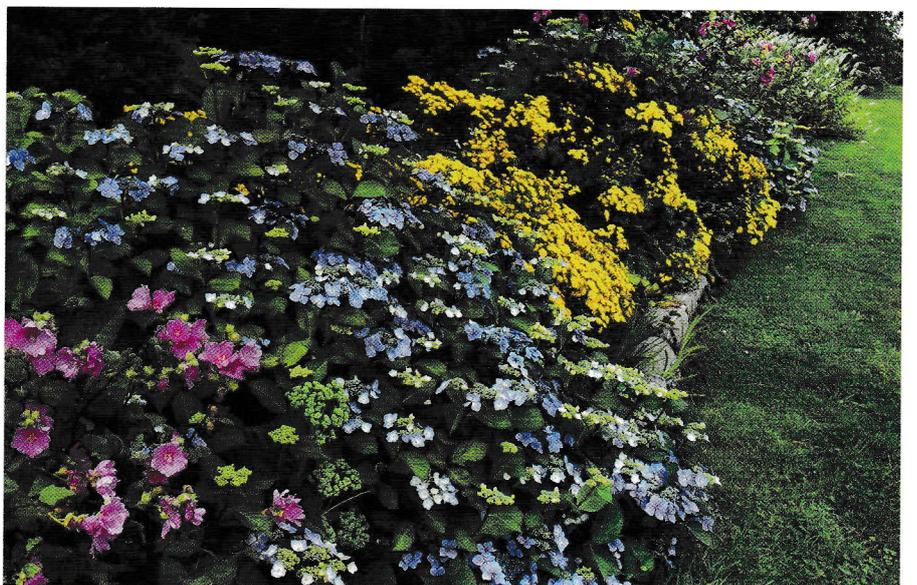
Something which Andy and Ingolf are most proud of is the fine Bronze Age burial monument with standing stones. “We knew there was a monument here, but we couldn’t find it,” Andy told me. A concerted hunt through thickets of bramble finally uncovered the stones. Today they stand proud, on the hill, under a fine Scot’s pine, with a view of the garden and West Cork landscape beyond, all under a huge sky. Professor William O’Brien from UCC, who had excavated the site in 1989, gave them the information that they now display on boards in the little stone piggery. The clearances also revealed two ancient apple trees. “The best trees!” Ingolf declared. “We had a friend in her nineties who told us that they were here when she was a child!” I left the garden, greatly impressed with this melange of old and new, exotic and native, created by two engaging gardeners. ■



Yellow *Leontodon rigens* in front of the Turf House



Mown grass provides a neat edge to some of the more naturalistic parts of the garden



The flowers of hydrangeas are blue on the acid, boggy soil in this garden