

The IRISH GARDEN

July 2005



Gardens in which to lose oneself are few and far between — it is then a rare pleasure to wander through the riverside and woodland garden behind Eugene and Hazel Wiseman's hardware store on the main street of Durrus in County Cork. This three-acre garden, located about eight miles south-west of Bantry, Co. Cork, is delightful in many respects and you can indeed lose your sense of direction and time on winding pathways, where, at each turn, unexpected vistas unfold. These vistas are not alone directly in your line of sight within 'Carraig Abhainn', but they run out into the surrounding hills and valleys, giving one the feeling that the garden is boundless.

This keen gardening couple have planted more than a few rhododendrons against this wild backdrop, but these are just some of the many plants in a planting scheme that contains, as a backbone, beech, maple, oak and chestnut, including a very beautiful variegated form of the last. Many different kinds of sorbus or mountain ash also feature, along with the sweet gum or liquidambar, blazing scarlet *Embotrium coccineum*, early-flowering yellow mimosa and tree ferns dicksonia and cyathea. "Our soil is acidic, though not viciously so, and all the ericaceous plants love it here," says Hazel. In addition, the lie of the land with its protective neighbouring hills conspires to

create a gentle micro-climate where relatively tender plants such as scented *Pittosporum tobira*, ferny foliaged *Melanthus major*, white-felted *Buddleja agasthosma*, red bottlebrush and cistus thrive all year. Snow is practically unheard of and frost a rare visitor to this southern peninsula washed so generously by the Gulf Stream.

Constrained on one side by the main street and on the other by the fast-flowing Four Mile River, the garden is a gradual taming of the naturalistic setting into one where discreet design shows to best advantage the many plants that thrive in this landscape. As one kind of plant passes its best, there's another to take its place. "There's always one which seems to encroach," says Eugene as he leads me to where woodlanders had overtaken an area soon to be planted with yet more large-leaved gunnera, rodgersia, and the yellow flag iris, *Iris pseudacorus*. These in turn will develop alongside a soon-to-be-placed 'skew' bridge that will bring visitors over the raging torrent and land them safely alongside the main riverside walk. "Here," says Eugene, "will be our new camellia walk, for we have over thirty varieties within the garden already." I can believe him, for on my two-hour tour, I saw no less than forty kinds of clematis — ranging from the wonderful evergreen 'Early Sensation' with its pure white, bowl-shaped flowers, to the deep blue nodding blooms of

'Frances Ravis' and on to 'Ville de Lyon', which in late summer will boast a stunning number of wine-red blooms that last for weeks if not months. The whole garden was fluid with an endless sense of movement and colour.

Carrig Abhainn has, like many a good garden, its own unique quirkiness. As you enter the garden from the roadway and turn slightly to the left, you are faced with a life-sized statue of Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, in all her semi-naked beauty. Above her head are three domed lamps which even by night emphasise her form and splendour. She stands, facing a thirty-foot enclosed wall mural depicting a coastal scene of some far-off land. The overhead protection and stage-like creation to this mural is fronted by four Corinthian columns. In front of this is a pool fed by a man-made diversion from the main river, resplendent with model liner and other crafted

'port' features. This area is most unusual and unlikely to be encountered in any other garden within the country. Like it or hate it, it does not offend. Elsewhere within the garden there are rampant lions, African masks, magnificent busts on pillared plinths, faces carved into tree trunks, and modern water features like 'boy and girl beneath umbrella' and Japanese style bridges. The effect near this last feature is eastern, and austere in its simplicity.

The Concours d'Elegance at Carrig Abhainn must surely be the riverside walk and specially created hard landscape areas. Here, Eugene has invested considerable time, effort and expense to turn a number of rocky outcrops into the most gorgeous of seating areas, where the rushing water can be observed tumbling and cascading only inches from where you sit. When I say the river tumbles and cascades I

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really mean it, for the rush of water over rock and steep precipice is truly awesome. During winter and particularly during springtime, downpours from thunderstorms can cause this river to rise four or five feet over the course of an hour and return to normal with equal speed. Flash-flooding of the river, says Hazel, is a regular and frightening occurrence.

At least three of these waterside features are virtual sun-traps, and on my visit I spent more than a fair share of my time taking the sun and watching dippers working through the foaming torrent in their quest for the insect food they rely on. Fish too, especially sea-trout and the odd salmon, frequent these waters.

All of the walks and pathways in Carrig Abhainn seem to cleverly converge on a central lawn area, in the middle of which Eugene has constructed a narrow circular raised bed, in the

centre of which stands an old village pump. The plantings within the raised beds reflect the glories of every season, from the summery incandescence of pyrethrum to the quiet autumnal pastels of pink and mauve Michaelmas daisies. For spring, there's a solid planting of daffodils and white azaleas, while for early summer there are cistus and helianthemums in the kinds of shades one associates with fabric and furnishings more than plants. It has a naturalness, and daring appeal from all angles but especially when viewed from the living area of the dwelling or indeed, from the patio, where sitting out and dining is a regular event.

Before making attempts to leave, Hazel had me pick any plant I fancied from her greenhouse collection. Planning and propagation are keys in Hazel's diligent

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approach to perpetuating the unique charm of this garden. Greenhouse, cold frame and sheltered areas are used to ensure a constant supply of plants. The ethos which underpins Hazel's attachment to this garden could be summed up in the phrase, 'the garden in my life, the life in my garden'. Begun only eleven years ago as part of an entry in the first West Cork Garden Trail, the garden now enjoys many visitors. Some of these come a number of times each year to observe the changing seasons and to see how they embellish the plantings there.

Carrig Abhainn is, above all, a garden around which to carry a light, fold-up seat so as to be able to repeatedly put it down to sit and appreciate every detail. If you are lucky enough to be offered tea and hot buttered scones on the paved area near the kitchen, you'll be rather slow to rise again, for it is possible to observe and admire much from this vantage point. It may not be the largest or grandest garden in West Cork but it is one that captivates, tweaks at your heart and begs to be enjoyed ... just lift the latch and walk inside. ■

'Carrig Abhainn' is open to visitors all summer.
Open 1 March-30 October, Mon.-Sat. 10.00-20.00.

