

DHU VARREN GARDEN

Laura and Mark Collins arrived in Kerry in 2000, bought an old farmhouse with two-and-a-half acres and set to work.

Shirley Lanigan went to see the fruits of their labour.



The first sight of Dhu Varren garden, from the gateway, is of a natural bullrush and lily pond, partially shaded by big gunnera leaves. Beside it is a four-metre, triple-trunked tree fern. This is one resilient tree. During the winter of 2010, with Mark and Laura away, it fell over, becoming submerged in the pond. They returned to find the tree frozen beneath the water. When the pond finally thawed they asked a farming neighbour if he would help them right the tree. "He thought we were mad," Laura said. "But he brought in the tractor and we hauled it up." The unusually shaped

tree fern survived its ordeal very well and today it towers over the pond.

Home to a sizable frog population, as well as newts, the pond looks natural because it is. Laura told me that just after they arrived to live here, there was a heavy rain shower. Quite suddenly there was a river flowing down the road outside the gate and coming in to surround the house.

"We thought we'd need an ark", she laughed. But Mark is a scientist and his response to the problem was to create a reservoir under the drive, the overflow



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lampranthus and fine specimens of grey-leaved *Echium candicans*, the area that contains this confection of yuccas, exotic ferns and succulents started out life as the car park.

On the other side of the stepping stone path is the east-facing house wall where among the great mass of plants is *Echium wildpretii*, a bugloss species that carries a red rather than blue spike of flowers. The Canary Island giant bugloss, *Echium pininana*, with regular blue flowers is here too, and survived the hard frosts. A tall *Buddleja colvilei* with red tassel flowers thrives in the shelter of the house wall.



of which fills the pond. This would be only the first of several methods they would use to deal with the wealth of water in their garden.

Close by is the imposing rockery they call Red Rock Canyon, in recognition of the 300 tons of local red sandstone barrowed in by Mark to build it. The rocky mound is filled with an array of exotics. The lush drapes of Hottentot fig, *Carpobrotus eduli*, from South Africa, look tender but it is evergreen and hardy here. Splashes of it appear between splendid specimens of Mexican native *Beschorneria yuccoides* with its great strap-like leaves and the flat discs of *Aeonium canariensis*. *Lewisia*

cotyledon, from North America, is another plant that thrives on the rock. Mark finds its little rosettes grow easily, just squeezed in between the boulders. With swathes of brilliantly coloured

The plants are well labelled as many of them are unusual and this garden is a real education for those with a desire to study plants. We looked at a New Zealand native *Aciphylla squarrosa* with strange thorny, thistle-like flowers and clump-forming *Kniphofia northiae*. All these plants, like those in the canyon bed, grow in almost pure stone and gravel, with a small amount of soil mixed in between the grit and stone.

We walked along the cistus and agapanthus lined path, between these two raised, busy beds and took the first of many forks in the path in this maze of a garden. It leads into a shaded bed of ferns, hostas and damp-loving astilbes. Passing a display of the royal fern, *Osmunda regalis*, Mark admires this great fern for its impressive unfurling crosiers and fronds and, when it dies down in winter, the gnarled brown stumps. For all their admiration of exotics, Mark and Laura have a real appreciation for great native plants too.

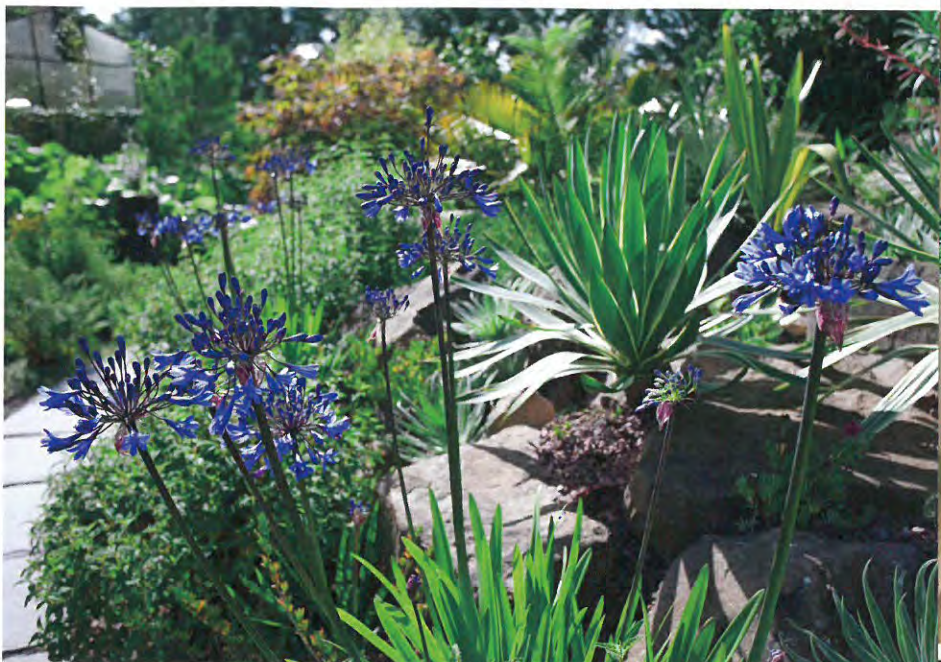
We arrived at an open, oriental-style garden built around a formal koi pond. It is an elaborate affair, a two-metre deep pond, fed by two waterfalls coming from two smaller raised ponds. From the bridge over the water you can see koi carp as big as spaniels swimming below. This feature, complete with all its elaborate workings and a

smart Japanese tea house, were all made by Mark and Laura over a seven-year period.

Ranged around the pond are Laura's cloud-pruned shrubs. She favours cryptomeria for creating these year-round features. Accompanied by a range of miniature recumbent junipers, Brewer's spruce and eastern hemlocks, they are very handsome. My eye was caught by several small specimens of Japanese privet, *Ligustrum japonicum* 'Rotundifolium', a lot more handsome a species than the usual hedging privet. Close by, *Acer palmatum* 'Shaina' is a favourite with visitors. Its leaves turn vivid scarlet in autumn, but it is equally handsome as a winter, bare skeleton.

These shrubs and trees, including a scented orange-flowered azalea, are delicately set off by a green sea of baby's tears, spiked with hostas and rosettes of pachysandra. We stopped to look at a tray of lobelia rosettes being readied to go into the garden. Mark explained that these were *Lobelia telekii* grown from seeds collected on Mount Kilimanjaro. They are fully hardy here. Behind the tea room, we were stopped in our tracks by the sight of a *Schefflera delavayi*, which has extraordinary cut-leaf foliage. The leaves are huge.

Here the arboretum and bamboo garden start. The path is a raised wooden boardwalk that zig-zags between fast-growing young trees. Below the path the ground is sodden most of the year. Mark had to cut an elaborate series of drains throughout the area. They lead to a central arterial stream that runs beneath the boardwalk, and is conducted into several natural ponds. This is as much an engineering feat as a garden. Mark outlined the unusual system he uses when planting in the wet heavy clay. "I have access to a source of dead tree fern trunks. We pile them up on top of the soil and then plant into them." His planting mounds stand like tuffets, proud of the wet ground. Looking at the speed of growth, it is obvious that the method works. Each tree is labelled with the year it was planted and the growth is remarkable. We pass romping specimens of the buckthorn, *Rhamnus frangula* 'Asplenifolia',





unusual *Quercus acuta*, an evergreen oak and, lying at an interesting angle, a large nothofagus.

On the other side of this particular path, there is an alpine rock garden, another large mound of wheelbarrowed boulders. There are forty tons of rock and grit to one of soil, perfect conditions for the alpinists. The mound stands high above the damp ground. In the first few steps we looked at: auriculas; sedums; alpine pink, *Dianthus deltoides*; fairy foxglove, *Erinus alpinus*; *Saxifraga paniculata* and *Veronica repens*. A 20cm tall *Rosa* 'Rouletti' with little red flowers is a real star. Standing on top of the rock hill is a sturdy miniature tree from New Zealand, *Phyllocladus asplenifolius* with handsome, pointed, waxy foliage.



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My own favourite plants here are the mat-forming ones, particularly *Erodium* 'Bishop's Form.' It resembles furry thyme. Even more furry is an unknown plant like a cross between a salvia and lambs ear, from Tenerife. Mark has a collection of celmisias and he is particularly fond of *Celmisia mackayi*. "I came across it growing on almost bare rock in New Zealand." He has managed to make it feel at home in Kerry. A bench sited to take in the alpine bed stands under Laura's favourite tree, the purple-leaved *Acacia baileyana* 'Purpurea.' Underneath it, there are waving stands of restio and self-sowing camassias and an unusual young tree, *Lomatia ferruginea*, which has delicate fern-like leaves. A Mediterranean bed across from the alpine bed enjoys a more sheltered aspect. It is home to *Cistus ladanifer* with slightly sticky leaves and white flowers, different kniphofias, including *Kniphofia caulescens* and 'Tawney King'. As we walked Mark pointed to the *Nothofagus dombeyi*, planted in 2005. It was about two metres tall. It now stands at seven metres. This is just one example of the speed plants can grow here. Another is a telopea with white flowers, growing rapidly.

A fork in the path leads past a grove of different weigelas. We continued past spiky aralias and species rhododendrons, all planted on top of the tree fern mounds. "Plants are like us. No-one likes to have wet feet." Along this path there are some impressive bamboos. Laura prunes up the culms so that they can be seen in their different colours. She particularly loves the *Borinda macclureana* with its blue-tinged culms. Mark feeds it horse manure and it responds by growing with vigour. Laura puts the large culms of Mexican *Chusquea culeou* down to the great doses of rain it enjoys. Enjoying the shelter offered by some of these tall bamboos is *Salix moupinensis* from China, which has unusual large, ridged leaves and before that, fat red shiny buds in spring. This tree is constantly commented on by visitors. Mark is busy taking cuttings to see how they fare.

Another much-loved feature is a long ribbon of the Chatham Island forget-me-not, *Myosotiduum hortensis*, a plant usually only seen in ones and twos. This

five-metre walk of the shiny leaved, vividly blue-flowering plant is remarkably pretty. Eupatorium, purple loosestrife and a range of different grasses and bull rushes grow in and beside the water, again planted to encourage wildlife. Also revelling in the wet ground there are all sorts of exotic hedychiums or ginger lily. Overhead is a Mexican oak, *Quercus ryhsophylla*, which has vivid red leaves at budbreak.

We climbed up to the raised summer house that stands over this wild part of the garden to take in the view. Looking in different directions we could see exotic, jungle-like Japanese hardy banana, papyrus, huge water lilies, dinner-plate leaves of darmera and lush marsh marigolds.

In summer, from this bird's eyes view, it is hard to see the water for the mass of growth. The fabulous plants are everywhere, from orange trumpet-flowered datura to unusual *Mahonia savilliana* as well as hosts of ferns, exotic and native.

While both work in the garden, Mark is the more obsessed, devoting what must be close to a working week to its care and development. Laura also gives all her spare time to its care. And when Mark's parents come to visit, they are hauled in to help. It was his parents that he picked up gardening from anyway. "And a neighbour who was a vegetable grower." Having spotted them off and on from different parts of the garden, we now arrived under a group of eight-metre tall redwoods, *Sequoiadendron giganteum* planted from a packet of seed twelve years ago.

"We thought they would be someone else's problem in decades to come. Now we think they might be our problem!" She could be right. They are lovely however. In the shade they cast, the king fern, *Todea barbara*, and an unusual tree fern wall, stand out. This is where they grow most of their collection of scheffleras, including *Schefflera alpina*, *S. multinervia* and *S. taiwaniana*.

Ducking in through a secret garden of ferns and mahonias, we arrived in the herb and nectar garden, a raised bed



garden of culinary herbs and herbaceous plants grown to provide nectar for insects. The first of two greenhouses is full of succulents, scores of aloes, and even forty-year-old cacti the size of basket balls, originally given by Mark to his mother as presents when he was a small boy. At least one of the slender tall cacti is making its way up to touch the high roof. Mark has plans for another glasshouse as the plants grow and spread. In the tropical house next door, he rears butterflies among the tropical gingers, trailing jasmines, alocasias and passionflower on which the caterpillars of tropical heliconius butterflies feed — just one more remarkable feature of a garden abundant with treasures. ■

Dhu Varren Garden is open May to August, details: www.dhuvarrengarden.com