



Two classic cottage garden plants, delphiniums and roses, blend with thalictrum, alstroemeria and a statement cardoon. The obelisk provides height and structure

COTTAGE PARADISE

When it comes to dream gardens, the classic, old-fashioned cottage variety, brimming with flowers and colour, is a sure-fire winner. Throw in a thatched cottage and beach-side setting for added perfection. **Shirley Lanigan** met Liz and Roger Pickett, the long-time gardeners of this idyllic garden in the seaside village of Laytown in Co Meath.



I had already caught sight of it when walking on the beach. Snooping over the dunes, there were cardoons and waving spikes of phormium flowers, those exotics, so loved by Irish birds. There was also a thatched roof — pure chocolate box perfection.

Later, as we sat in her kitchen, Liz Pickett told me about the garden. It has been in her family since Victorian times, along with a series of little cottages which, as early as 1908, were advertised as having “been let to visitors for many years”. “I was born and brought up here,” said Liz. “I was always mad about gardening.” So, in 1997, with her engineer husband Roger Pickett, Liz began to build a proper garden around the cottages. We would see many of Roger’s innovative engineering features as we made our way around. “We started

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at the front on a paddock on my father’s farm. Then I went on and on. I just kept developing it. Gardeners never have enough garden!”

Much of the two-and-a-half-acre garden seen today however, was created since 2013, when the pair really upped their game. Then, when everything closed down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the addiction to gardening increased. Having always taken cuttings and worked with seed, Liz began taking courses with Jimi Blake and really started to concentrate on these aspects of gardening. “The courses opened new horizons.” As a result, today, most of the plants in the garden come from her own greenhouse just as they traditionally did in old cottage gardens.

“I love the style of cottage gardening. It’s so forgiving. It’s not rigid and working with self-sown and self-seeding plants is a huge part of the joy. [Renowned British plantswoman] Beth Chatto, said that if you keep the edges and hedges tidy you can get away with a lot!”

Liz works organically and accommodates pollinating insects everywhere. As we walked around we would meet great heaving mounds of *Echium pininana* and *E. candicans*, busy with feeding bees and stands of wild ox-eye daisies, making their contribution too.

We made our way to the front gate, accompanied by Poppy the dog, to begin the visit. The side boundary is marked by a line of sycamore trees that provide a canopy over a slope above a field-stone wall. Early in the year, this area shines with snowdrops, daffodils, epimedium and bluebells, before the overhead branches come into leaf. There are also spent tulips from pots and planters. They reappear every year, in lesser numbers as spot colour. As the year moves on, *Geranium x johnsonii* ‘Johnson’s Blue’, *Geranium* ‘Rozanne’ and *Libertia grandiflora* have proved well suited to life in the shade, although the slope does get a certain amount of sun. I climbed the slope to sit in a little arbour which has a view over all this, and on out to the beach and sea.

Field-stone banks and walls are a signature feature throughout the garden. Some are historic. Roger built more of them. They also use willow hurdles to fence and hold in bursting flower borders. We passed the cottages, each one individual in style. There are masses of roses over porches, mixed borders peeping in windows and collections of pots by front doors, and they are all thatched with reed, courtesy of a local thatcher. Liz told me that the reed is more durable than straw. It lasts up to sixty years.

The boundary sycamore walk morphs into a shaded Stream Garden. This is like a tended jungle, with every shade and shape of green foliage, spotted with splashes of white. We peered in through stands of *Carex pendula* and *Dicksonia antarctica* at creamy *Zantedeschia aethiopica* and



Hydrangea arborescens 'Annabelle', lush in the damp ground. There are also delicate pinks in the shape of *Gladiolus byzantinus* and yellow flag irises. This jungle ravine culminates on the front wall with a tangle of roses and foxgloves, starring an impressive mass of the pale pink rambler, *Rosa* 'Open Arms'.

On the sunny, garden side, there is a raised bank with tall cardoons and hollyhocks over several different agapanthus, including a dark variety, *Agapanthus* 'Black Buddhist'. Liz pruned up a line of mature shrubs of *elaagnus*, *Polylepis australis* and *Olearia x haastii*. The raised crowns allow more light into the understorey plants. In spring, these include lots of primroses.

We arrived at the previously mentioned first

garden. This is an Infinity Bed — a sweeping figure-of-eight border that offers a series of different pictures as one rounds it. In this hectic rolling show, the flower parade tumbles in true cottage garden style, one splash after another, as the summer moves along. White, cactus-form dahlias, grown from seed, extend up between stands of dill and *Potentilla fruticosa* 'Tangerine'. Earlier, there was *Aquilegia chrysantha* 'Yellow Queen', among others, between patches of rich red *Tulipa* 'National Velvet' and salmon-coloured tulip called 'Menton'. The bicoloured orange and plum tulip, 'Prinses Irene', ties the other shades together. There are stands of alstroemeria in a host of shades, cheek by jowl with pink *Lychnis coronaria*. In the middle, a tall obelisk lets a purple *Clematis* 'Jackmanii' and pink *Rosa* 'Zéphirine



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2 Vivid pink *Geranium* 'Anne Thomson' forms a tumbling mass of flowers all summer long

3 This snow-white form of the rosebay willow herb, *Chamaenerion angustifolium* 'Album' is loved by pollinators and makes an impressive sight

4 Abundant planting and a random mass of flower forms, textures, and colours define a cottage style border

5 Most of the plants in the garden are grown in this glasshouse from seed or cuttings

6 Packed to productive capacity, the glasshouse commands an enviable view of the beach and out to sea

Naturally in a cottage garden, there must be roses and there are plenty of them here. One of Liz's favourites is 'Warm Welcome' which has brilliant orange blooms. She paired it with an equally zingy *Alstroemeria* 'Indian Summer'.

I was very taken by the planting in one area of dry shade, beneath a tall and dense sycamore and pollarded eucalyptus. There was a thriving *Dahlia* 'David Howard' and a healthy run of *Maianthemum racemosum*, (formerly *Smilacina racemosa*). Scented *Rosa* 'Madge' climbed the eucalyptus while *Romneya coulteri*, *Fuchsia magellanica* and the exotic-looking *Fatsia polycarpa* 'Green Fingers' were all looking tip-top too. "I'm very proud of that," Liz smiled, pointing to a gorgeous stand of *Myosotidium hortensia* that she grew from seed. She went on to assure me that this dry, dark spot does get a splash of evening sun.

Out in the full sun, we looked at a tall white *Epilobium*. "I got it as a present from Daphne Shackleton," she said, adding "It doesn't spread like the pink". Inspired colour mixes are the norm here. Vivid pink *Geranium* 'Anne Thomson' was paired with dark red hemerocallis and yellow *Cephalaria gigantea*, over orange and ruby alstroemeria. Purple *Geranium ibericum* and orange *Salvia confertiflora* take over from rusty-coloured 'Indian Prince' marigolds. Liz has fun with colour. I think this garden could convert even the most timid, colour-shy gardener.

Situated by the sea, the ground is extremely free draining and watering might otherwise be a nightmare, but Roger has set up a good number of wooden casks as water butts about the place, each fitted with stylish, copper and brass piped feeds and taps. These keep the scores of pots and planters nicely hydrated.

There is a little orchard which features the famed local apple 'Blood of the Boyne'. Roger recommends it highly. The orchard is bounded by a flower border full of dark



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Drouhin' stand proud of the neighbours. Close by, a *Ginkgo biloba* planted thirty-one years ago, is now two metres tall. "I shifted it three times," Liz commented.

Another leggy specimen that stood out was *Chicorium intybus*. "It weaves through everything." The Wedgewood blue flowers work well with dusty pink annual poppies and purple *Campanula glomerata*. To stop this being too calm a mix, Liz added in a smattering of marigolds in pale lemons and punchy oranges. Her ability to mix mad colours together is impressive. There are abutilons everywhere with pale lilac and white flowers over stands of *Echium candicans* and towering *E. pininana*. Every so often, white *Crambe maritima*, a classic seaside plant, emerges from between the hot colours.

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Thalictrum 'Black Stockings' and one of the cottages supporting a richly scented *Rosa* 'Peace'. In the shadier part of the border under a purple beech, the huge, heart-shaped leaves and deep blue flowers of *Trachystemon orientalis* caught the eye. Liz uses it widely in the shade. On another of the cottages, I admired a *Rosa* 'Mme Isaac Péreire', planted by Liz's grandmother a century ago. The evergreen honeysuckle twining through it, is more recent.

From first to last, there are quirky features, all contributing to making the garden unique and interesting. Looking at a clipped hillock of ivy, Liz told me that it is simply growing over a log. Roger's many restored wooden gates are also

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notable. One of these is over a century and a half old. The restoration work is as much a joy as the flowers.

Given the size of the garden, it is as well that Liz loves to grow from seed. Roger helped her by building a greenhouse or 'power-house' as she calls it. In here, countless seedlings and cuttings romp away, while the graduates live outside in potted arrangements. There are trailing begonias, *Matthiola incana* 'Pillow Talk', *Fuchsia boliviana* and scores of other treats in busy competition throughout the garden. One of the more remarkable plants here is a tender *Oxalis tuberosa* tucked in between a pot of hedychium or ginger lily and several late flowering salvias. The upkeep

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7 A well-placed rustic seat, intimately immersed among poppies, ox-eye daisies and viper's bugloss, allows enjoyment of the sea view

8 A romantic jumble of bulbs, annuals and perennials combine in a rich tapestry of colour

9 The spiky blooms of blue echiums and yellow verbascum rise above the scented yellow trumpets of evening primrose, ox-eye daisies and *Lychnis coronaria* against a sheltering background structure of phormiums

10 Steps and terraces create different zones and lead to the summer house which provides a focal point and place to enjoy sheltered views

11 Swathes of naturalistic planting create a loose and unstructured effect

12 Silvery, evergreen leaves and yellow flowers of shrubby *Brachyglottis* 'Sunshine' are an attractive contrast to the fine-textured foliage of bronze fennel

13 Rich pink *Lychnis coronaria* combined with mauve-purple poppies

of the pots alone would keep most gardeners fully occupied.

Before we moved on, we stopped to feed the friendly koi and orph in the raised pond also created by Roger. *Erigeron karvinskianus* sprouted from the stone wall underneath.

As we passed one massed planting, Liz pointed to a group of lilies that was giving her no joy. An infestation of lily beetles had devoured both flowers and leaves. Not to be deterred, Liz was planning on transferring the whole lot out to the seaside boundary to discover if sea spray and wind might assist against the red menace. This is a high-maintenance garden and as we walked, I had to remind myself that Liz is the main gardener and her ability to work it was seriously compromised in the past few months by a broken rib. Yet it still looked wonderful.

We finished the tour at the kitchen door, which is up on a height, looking out onto the beach, through a sea of viper's bugloss, *Echium vulgare*, alive with bees. There was also much of the gorgeous matthiola, great sprawls of knautia, steely blue eryngium and magenta *Lychnis coronaria*. Other sea spray-friendly flowers include kniphofia and the phormium I had previously seen from the beach.

Leaving the garden, inspired by so many flower combinations, I asked myself what sort of perfect lives Liz and Roger must have led in previous existences to find themselves so perfectly situated in this one. They must have been saints...

'The Cottages' is open as part of The Boyne Valley Garden Trail. Also see the Instagram address @thecottagesireland. ●



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