

## Ornamental Horticulture in Ireland<sup>©</sup>

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The founding of the GB&I Region of IPPS in 1968 was a milestone in the affairs of the hardy ornamental plant industry in these islands. For aspiring researchers in this field, it was very comforting to have direct access to some of the most fertile minds among its membership. Its publications and ideals inspired a generation of growers, educators, and researchers and paved the way for progress. In what had traditionally been a “closed shop” in many ways, knowledge was spread on a new level by virtue of its “Seek and Share” ethos. It is a singular honour for Irish IPPS members to host the International meeting here.

Ireland has a mild, wet climate. January temperature averages are from 4 to 7 °C and July from 14 to 17 °C. The warm currents of the Gulf Stream and the North Atlantic Drift influence the climate, giving suitable conditions for a diverse and exotic cultivated, naturalised, and wild flora, particularly on the western side of the island. Killarney, for example, is notable for its naturalised tree ferns while *Arbutus unedo* forms larger trees there than anywhere else in Europe. Mount Stewart on the Ards Peninsula has an almost sub-tropical flora.

Two individuals have had a special influence on Irish horticulture. The first is Saint Fiachra, the patron saint of gardening, who was born in the West of Ireland in the 7th century. He cultivated herbs and medicinal plants and spent his days in solitude, mortification, and prayer and due to his works, attracted much unwanted attention from which he fled to France, where he was granted a hermitage by a bishop. The French revere him and there are three towns and many churches named after him.

The second is William Robinson, born in the Irish midlands in the early 19th century, who worked at several Irish horticultural establishments before going to Regents Park, London, where he was appointed as foreman to the herbaceous section. A strong advocate of informal gardening, he hated formal bedding displays, statuary, mock Italian, standard roses, and “similar artifices.” His importance to gardening is immense and he encouraged the use of dense planting of perennials, ground cover subjects, the use of hardy perennials and natives in natural drifts and laid down markers for modern landscaping concepts. He published two classic books, *The English Flower Garden* and *The Wild Garden*, writing as he gardened “avidly and with vehemence.”

Gardening, though hardly the preserve of tenants, cottiers, or small-holders throughout Ireland, was alive and well among the gentry. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, extensive daffodil breeding in several parts of the country was producing numbers of Awards of Merit honours when shown at the Royal Horticultural Society’s shows in London.

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<sup>1</sup> The author presented the keynote opening address to the GB&I Conference. He opened his address by remembering long-standing GB&I member Nigel Timpson, who died in July 2009: Nigel took over Hewton Nurseries, Devon, in the 1970s and moulded it into a formidable operation over the following 30 years. Experiencing difficulty in selling the nursery when he wished to retire, Nigel oversaw its closing down over an 18 month period and died shortly afterwards.

More recently, the renowned rose breeding efforts of the firms of McGredy and Dickson in Northern Ireland gave rise to a series of well-loved cultivars.

The selection of naturally occurring seedlings from a range of genera has given Irish horticulture a wealth of ornamental subjects such as *Mahonia* × *media* 'Charity' and 'Winter Sun'; *Luma apiculata* 'Glanleam Gold'; the range of cypress cultivars from Watsons Nurseries; the selection and breeding successes of the famous Slieve Donard Nurseries; and the range of plants that first saw the light of day at the delightful gardens at Rostrevor and Rowallane. In modern times, Philip Moreau's escallonias (*Escallonia* spp. and hybrids) are show stoppers, as are many more new plants in the trade which have emerged from today's commercial nurseries.

The emergence of a modern ornamental plant industry was greatly aided by the establishment of a National Agricultural Research organisation which was financed in the late 1950s by a U.S. Marshall Aid grant. This new body established research programmes in agriculture, forestry, and horticulture. The aim of its first director, Dr. Tom Walsh, was to re-shape rural economic development. Hardy nursery stock, like the other branches of horticulture, was well served by a rigorous research and development programme, starting with crop protocols and developing into a production systems approach. With a specialist extension service and degree and diploma education programmes, nurseries developed, garden centres flourished, and landscaping emerged as a substantial element of the industry.

The late 1980s was the dawn of a golden era for Irish ornamental horticulture. Strong immigration followed the beginning of a building boom and the nursery stock industry enlarged and developed accordingly. Costs were rising but prices were keeping pace and the trade enjoyed some good trading years. Development was in evidence everywhere with new houses and commercial buildings — and as developers recognised that the prospect of selling properties was intertwined with high quality professional landscaping work, each stressed the desirability of their properties accordingly.

Things slowed dramatically with the international economic downturn. Every country has experienced this and there is no easy resolution to the problem of falling demand, sluggish trading, and pessimism about the immediate future.

Nevertheless, these recessionary times can offer opportunities. During times of plenty, standards can slip and businesses can forget about the importance of fair pricing policies. But in these straightened times the opportunity for innovation, re-evaluation of the business, and a realistic attempt to eliminate weaknesses has arrived. Can we cull some lines, either because they are not up to quality standards or because they are too widely grown? Are we doing enough to actually promote our own business? Can we do more to foster our contacts with the contractors and garden centre operators, exchange suggestions and promote special lines? Can we not *display* some more desirable plants for hedging and give details of how one should actually choose hedging, look after hedging? It might save posterity from the blighted misuse of Leyland cypress.

Speaking of intrusive hedging, is it not noticeable that we have enormous quantities of unwanted biomass in our gardens, which most householders intend doing nothing about? Some countries have been running successful "scrappage schemes" to encourage motorists to scrap their old, polluting cars for cleaner new ones thus helping the automotive industry. Is there any chance of convincing our local or national governments to introduce a scrappage scheme for this ungainly and un-

wanted biomass and by so doing, directly help out the haulage business, biomass conversion businesses, garden designers, and plant suppliers? We have the most magnificent range of products for sale — why not get serious about their promotion? We should remember that we plant on behalf of posterity whether it is on golf courses, parklands, streets, gardens, or forest areas.

It has been a great pleasure for me to open this conference. When I think of IPPS, I think of history, friendship, and significant horticultural achievements. I think of the opportunity for contact with members from other countries and look to the members of today and tomorrow to ensure that for the future we maintain the traditions on which IPPS is built. Whilst mindful of these traditions, today's members must also ensure the development of the Society.