

The Irish Garden

SUMMER SPECIAL 2026 | WWW.GARDEN.IE

SUMMER DAYS

Five planting plans to inspire

SUMMER
SPECIAL
ISSUE

WILD AT HEART

Inside wildlife cameraman Colin Stafford-Johnson's Wicklow garden

GARDEN GETAWAY

IRELAND'S FINEST GARDEN STAYS

12 MONTHS OF FLAVOUR

OUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO GROWING HERBS

A PLANT FOR EVERY ROOM | GET GARDEN PARTY READY | MAKE A MINI POND

€6.50 £4.95
INCLUDING ALL TAXES





Visit Vandeleur

From a glint in the collective eye of a community group back in the late 1990s, to the handsome open garden that graces the town of Kilrush in Co Clare today, the Vandeleur walled garden has come a long way, **Shirley Lanigan** writes

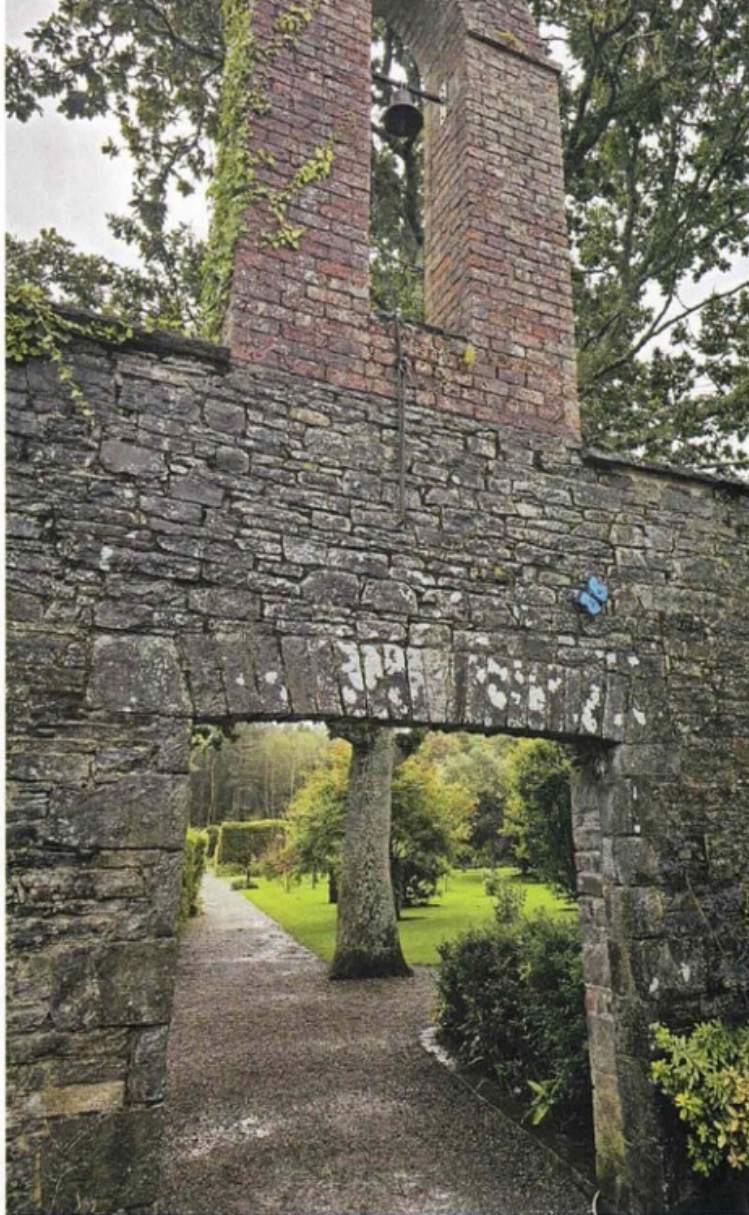


It was not long after a community group had taken on the ruin of an old walled garden on the edge of the town of Kilrush that I first visited. Walls that needed repair surrounded a mess of self-sown ash and sycamore. There was even talk of a car in the middle of it all, with some of those trees growing through it. Decades had passed since the garden had known care, but the people of Kilrush were not daunted. Clare Co Council bought the property, gave it to the Kilrush Amenity Trust, which quickly got stuck in. Each visit since, has offered up a spree of new developments. The old walled garden, once serving the pleasure of a single wealthy family, is now a centre of civic endeavour, with education and employment, tourism and pleasure, all part of the offering of good things, that these days make up the Vandeleur walled garden.

Karoly Torok has been head gardener here since 2005, steering the garden and several hundred Community Employment employees who have taken part in the work of running its 2.2 acres. Karoly builds on the work started by his predecessors, Hugh O'Hara and Fidelma O'Kelly. This is a long-term project. The walled garden stretches back to the 1790s and in its modern iteration, it is the proud holder of a Green Flag celebrating the effort they have put into improving biodiversity.

From the start, it was decided that the garden should be no museum. In any case, apart from the 1837 Ordnance Survey map and a tiny number of Lawrence Collection photographs from the turn of the twentieth century, the record is scant. The team located the original path network and evidence of borders running the length of the walls, "but really, this is a modern garden," explained Karoly.

My most recent visit began in the newly restored courtyard buildings, with their unusual, sliding leaded windows, which once let light into the stables. From here you reach the large sunny courtyard,

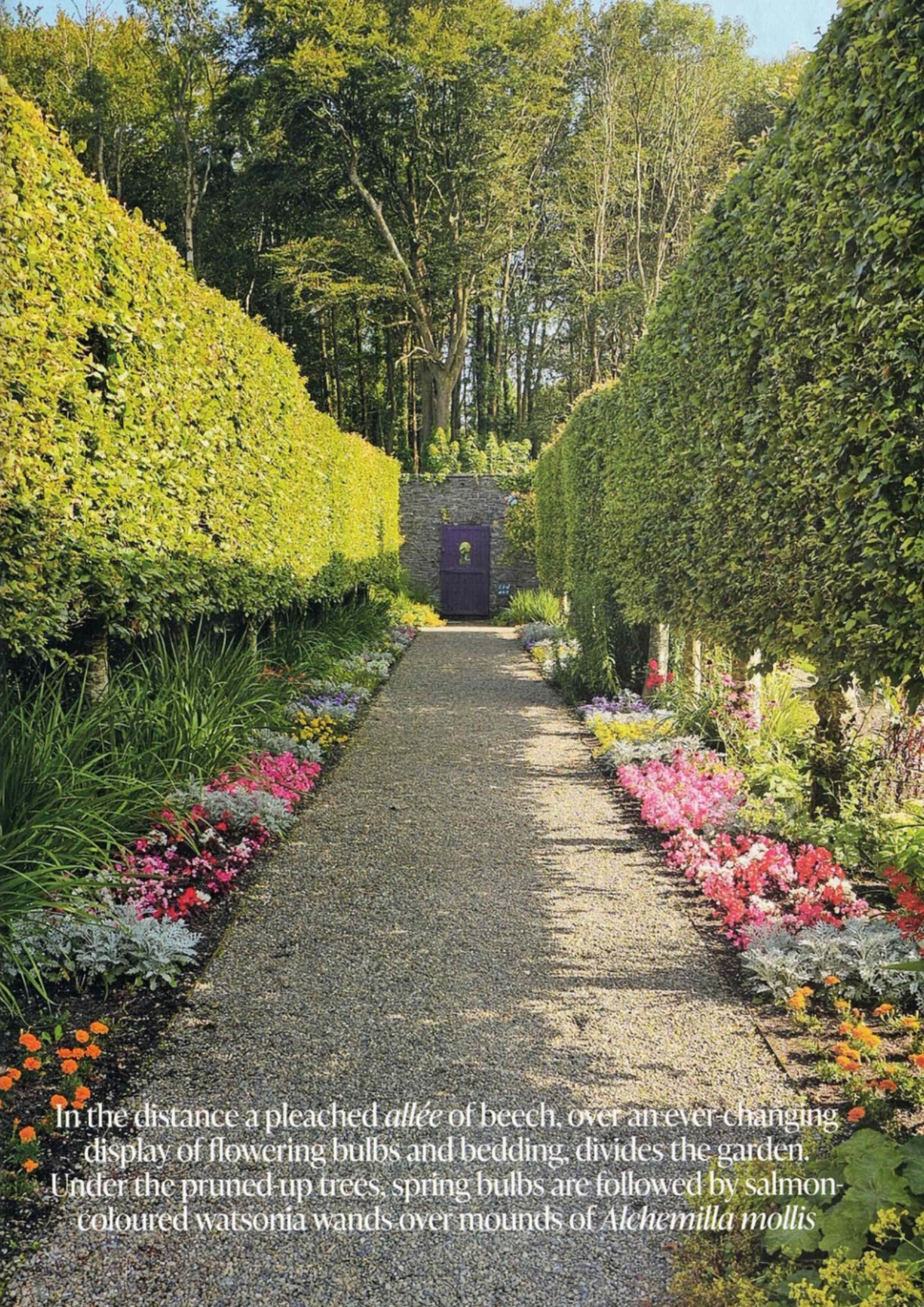


THIS PAGE: Bell tower and arch into the walled garden (top); Karoly Tokay, head gardener (bottom). **OPPOSITE:** The pleached beech *allée*

where they sell plants, some reared by the team, using compost made in the garden, alongside plants bought from local nurseries. There is also a collection of farm and garden machinery that could fox the most knowledgeable garden historian.

The entrance to the walled garden proper, is from the courtyard. Standing under the arched bell tower, there are a series of alluring sights, none of which speak of the classic walled kitchen garden, with utilitarian lines of produce, combined with some ornamentals. Instead, to one side, are the beginnings of a little arboretum, a varied mix of young specimen trees, each standing on smart, well-edged planting circles cut into a lush, mixed-species lawn. Karoly told me that this is his favourite place in the garden, home to several quiet corners, perfect for a few minutes sos on a busy day. There are baby monkey puzzles, *Araucaria araucana*, pruned-up *Parrotia persica*, a multi-trunked *Amelanchier lamarckii*, flowering cornus and a beautiful *Mespilus germanica*, or common medlar. This opens onto a sunny lawn, with Victorian-style bedding borders, where regiments of shout-out-loud, yellow and orange tagetes, purple ageratum and red begonias, line out like so many colourful rugs around fountains of *Trachycarpus fortunei* and clipped box walls, reflecting one era of the garden's history. In the distance a pleached *allée* of beech, over an ever-changing display of flowering bulbs and bedding, divides the garden. Under the pruned-up trees, spring bulbs are followed by salmon-coloured watsonia wands and mounds of *Alchemilla mollis*. This, and the beech maze next door, recall an earlier, Dutch garden style. There is fun to be had in the flat labyrinth, a set of giant chess and draughts and pieces of sculpture, scattered through the open area. I passed a young lad, beating himself at chess. The long walls, including the south-facing run (curved, to maximise warm wall space), are all planted with deep, mixed shrub borders, punctured by pavilions and pergolas to sit in, as well as the partial remains of an ancient lean-to greenhouse. This has been partially restored, so that its footprint is apparent. Detective work carried out revealed a room in front, which might have been a tea house, affording the family all year entertainment. The backing wall with its cappings, is still in perfect order. Even without a greenhouse, a big flowering *Musa basjoo* and *Actinidia kolomikta* lend a tropical feel to this area, with exotic-looking gladioli, golden inulas and huge artichokes, *Romneya coulteri*, *Euphorbia mellifera* and a great big fruiting fig.

The boundary beds offer an array of interesting and flowering shrubs, chosen to bring the garden looking good, through the year. From early magnolias to gorgeous orange abutilon and purple *Hibiscus syriacus* in summer, plants like these point to the shelter that the belt of mature trees outside the wall provides. There is pretty *Enkianthus campanulatus*, with its pink bells, and all sorts of hydrangeas, including elegant *Hydrangea aspera* (Villosa Group). So many of the plants here were chosen to attract pollinators and the bees ►



In the distance a pleached *allée* of beech, over an ever-changing display of flowering bulbs and bedding, divides the garden. Under the pruned up trees, spring bulbs are followed by salmon-coloured watsonia wands over mounds of *Alchemilla mollis*



THIS PAGE: Flowers and vegetables in the vegetable garden.

OPPOSITE: The new greenhouse and vegetable beds.

were busy on a *Drimys winteri*. In the shadier borders, *Crinodendron hookeri* and sarcococca back and support hardy geraniums and spiky acanthus, bergenias and toad lilies. In the sunnier spots there are big beefy roses.

Karoly told me that he first encountered this garden as a tourist. "That visit, June of 2005, I didn't think I would ever be working here. These days I look back at the pictures I took on that day – I take pictures wherever I go. The changes are so interesting."

This is a garden where there is no fear of change. "We have always wanted to introduce new things, especially for the local visitors. They come in every week. We need to keep them happy." On the subject of changes, a slightly informal Robinsonian style, is the look favoured these days. "We try to plant unusual plants that will survive here; plants that support wildlife. I leave a bit of overcrowded growth to provide shelter for bugs, birds and mammals. We also do not cut back until February. That's for the animals as well, but the plants also do better when that protection is there. Managed chaos describes it, I think."

The small vegetable garden forms a semi-circle in front of the new greenhouse in the centre of the garden. "The idea is to plant things, and let them grow through their lifecycle, to produce seeds. Birds eating the cabbage seeds is great. I put out signs to let the visitors know this." They mix rudbeckia with strawberries, or different, pretty salad crops, like endive, lettuce of all sorts, dark kale and multi-coloured chard, in front of tall sweetcorn. Beside them, lines of broccoli plants happily go to seed, left for the birds. "People ask if they can pull and bring home the vegetables, I say, leave them *in situ* for the birds to get the seeds. I also try to encourage people to use pollinator-friendly plants in their gardens, native too if possible."

The new greenhouse sits on the site of an old garden building. It hosts seed-sowing and growing classes and events – including weddings – between some beautifully composed groupings of bananas, strelitzia and scented pelargoniums. This metal house replaces the wooden version that they built in 2005, which, despite care, succumbed to the Irish weather.

The CE scheme workers, up to 18 at a time, learn the skills of growing plants and caring for them, dealing with customers in the nursery and selling plants. The learning here is wide-ranging. Karoly, with his team, answer questions from visitors about plants that will grow well on the west coast. The challenges of running a garden with a constantly changing, student workforce are many. As they become proficient at gardening, they find jobs elsewhere and they are lost to the garden. "It can be upsetting for all involved, losing people who so loved working and training here, but such is the nature of these community enterprises."

It is hard to think that a proportion of the workers have no green fingers – looking at the beautiful work a quarter of a century's worth of employment scheme people – ably supported by Karoly and his predecessors – can achieve. ■

