Na liosan[1] – a Hebridean experience

Stuart Oakley

July 1976 found two eager 28-year-olds plus six-month-old son and a (somewhat older) rabbit carefully negotiating the gangplank of the MV Suilven at the dockside in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, and into a new life. For anyone not familiar with the name, Lewis is found in the top left hand corner of the BBC weather maps, under the W of Wet and Windy. Why the Outer Hebrides? A lack of pollution, a lack of crowds, and lots of clean, open spaces – perfect for bringing up a family.

Our gardening experience was limited to 18 months in London with a pocket handkerchief and an allotment which turned into a fight with couch grass (lost). Hardly great credentials for taking on one of the most exposed locations in the British Isles, with high rainfall; severe, salt-laden winds; and acid, nutrient-poor peat for soil. Other than in the town of Stornoway, gardens in Lewis were rare, with vegetables the main concern. With growing conditions so difficult, the typical Lewis attitude – if you can't eat it, don't grow it – seems very reasonable. Our aspirations for our two acres were to keep goats and chickens, grow our own fruit and vegetables, cut hay, and have a few flowers to look nice.

Initially the land was rough grazing, although there had been a vegetable patch in the 1920s but no one could remember where. We have since come across some areas of good, friable soil which we assume were the cultivated patches – it would have made things much easier if we had found them earlier. About half the area

Fig. 1 The veg patch 1980.

Fig. 2 …and in 2008

[1] Gaelic for 'the garden'

Fig. 3 Looking closer, still no trees or gardens in sight.

slopes steeply with a southerly aspect, with the remaining flat area at the top of the hill. (Flat is a relative term, as I discovered recently when we had a greenhouse built.)

We have made numerous mistakes and consigned many plants to plant heaven, but we've slowly learned how to grow a garden, either by finding plants tolerant of the conditions, or by modifying the environment. About ¾ acre is now growing well, mostly on the slope, and about 80% is flowers. We grow much of our own veg and some of our own fruit – but no goats or chickens.

Our first lesson was on the nature of the soil. We chose a random site in the centre of the slope for a potato plot, where it would catch the sun and drain well. It had a thin layer of peat and stones over boulder clay with nowhere more than a spade's depth of soil and, in places, with the boulders just under the surface. The soil was so poor that we harvested fewer tubers than we'd planted. We quickly learned the value of goat and chicken manure to improve the fertility of the soil and still use about a tonne a year (although it's cow manure now). Traditionally seaweed is used but it was hard to fit in seaweed collection with a full-time job, so we restrict ourselves to buying seaweed meal and extract to provide much needed trace elements.

Fig. 4 A harvest of plastic bottles, useful for protecting seedlings and transplants.

Not all our soil is so stony but it is, being mainly peat, poor in nutrients, acidic and water retentive. And almost nowhere is there more than a spade's depth of soil. It has no crumb structure and sets into 'bricks' as it dries. We discovered this when a neighbouring crofter ploughed two plots for our vegetables and fruit and the

turves stood on their edges as solid slabs of peat. We diligently chopped the turves into manageable pieces and laid them grass side down, worked the top surface to give us something vaguely looking like a tilth and planted. The next year we found the slabs were still slabs and some we could build with. It took years of cultivation to bring this land into a fine, rich, friable soil.

Fig. 5 Where we sit in shelter – pity about the lack of view.

The second lesson was the power of the wind. We had brought a number of plants with us, so quickly dug a patch of (rocky) ground to the side of the house which is almost at the top of the hill. Now it is obvious in retrospect that winds get faster as you go up hill, and that buildings cause immense turbulence, so it was probably not the wisest site for these poor plants. Only two of several dozen made it through the first winter, a *Cortaderia richardii* and an unknown escallonia. These have become the parents of numerous offspring which we have used gratefully to provide shelter. Without having learned from our mistake we built a patio close by, to enjoy warm summer evening BBQs with our children. We did construct a raised perimeter bed to grow cherry plum ('tough as old boots' *Prunus cerasifera)* as shelter, but only one of the original twenty survives after 25 years, all of 50cm tall. Needless to say, the BBQs were not a great success, but the washing dries well if we can keep it on the line.

Winds tend to be stronger and more frequent in the winter, but gales can and do happen at any time in the year. One of the more heart-wrenching experiences is watching the newly transplanted cabbages spinning round in circles until they finally take off like helicopters in the wind. And storms in June effectively prevented any growth in the hedging for three years running.

Lesson number three was the weather. Being surrounded by the sea and so far north means that we get over 150cm of rain a year, probably more as the water tends to blow out of the rain gauge when it has more than an inch in it. Hoeing is ineffective as the weeds just root again in the damp soil, and we soon discovered that, on water-retentive peat which is waterlogged for much of the winter and wet for much of the summer, trying to dry hay with water rising around our wellies can be difficult. It doesn't always rain heavily, although there are a lot of days like that, but it is frequently damp – dreich is a good Scots word to describe it. If that isn't

Fig, 6 Lily alley

enough to depress anyone, damp days also have heavy cloud cover which means that warmth and light levels are low. Our temperatures are generally much cooler in summer but, because of the sea, warmer in winter than most other parts of the UK, and getting warmer. Snow and even frost are relatively uncommon.

The fourth lesson was that a slope can make problems worse. Yes, a slope gives us a magnificent view, it quickly warms in sunshine, it drains well, and it is easy to walk down. But rain drains to the bottom forming permanent wetlands, the soil tends to wash down hill over winter, nutrients are quickly leached out, wind speed increases, and it is hard work walking up when you have forgotten the secateurs.

So, what have we learned from these lessons? Our first priorities were to get better fruit and vegetables. We needed to improve the soil and provide shelter. Cultivation, manure and compost over many years have gone a long way to getting good soil, and sowing a green manure not only adds organic matter but also helps stop erosion in the winter. Now, when we dig over new land, the peat is chopped finely with a spade before compost and manure are added and this speeds up the transformation enormously. The initial digging, however, is very slow.

The problem with shelter is twofold. What will grow and where to put it. To be effective over any distance on a slope, a shelter belt would have to be very tall. This would take a long time, create shade, and increase the chance that the trees or shrubs would blow over. Trees of any kind are quite uncommon in the Hebrides, other than in sheltered sites, so our choices were limited. The only solution was to grow a hedge around each garden, creating a series of enclosed spaces. *Rosa rugosa* and unspecified willow are used by some, and they were the first we put in, spaced about 2m from the garden edges. Alder, Swedish whitebeam, hawthorn, rowan, sycamore and sitka spruce were the next (a cheap offer from a tree nursery) followed by *Cotoneaster lacteus* (a mistaken identification by an expert of a shrub my mother-in-law had given us), privet (rooted twigs from feeding stick insects), ash and broom. As we gained more experience we were able to increase the proportion of successful plants and buy those which we felt stood the best chances in our conditions. They include *Cotoneaster bullatus, Cortaderia richardii, Escallonia* (all from seedlings), *Fuchsia magellanica , Olearia traversii, O. virgata*

var. *lineata* 'Dartonii', *O. macrodonta* (from cuttings), blackthorn, sea buckthorn (*Hippophae rhamnoides)*, white poplar, downy birch (*Betula pubescens)*, silver birch (*B. pendula)*, and larch, bought in. Newer additions, which we have great hopes for but are yet unproven, include guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa)*, *Amelanchier canadensis*, *Brachyglottis rotundifolia*, *Spirea* 'Arguta' and *Ozothamnus rosmarinifolius*..

Not all have been total successes. *Rosa rugosa* is limited in height but not in width. The willows and the olearia tend to grow so fast they blow over – a regime of coppicing for a few years allows better roots to develop and secure them. Some alders love wet places but most others do not, particularly sea buckthorn – it takes all the weather but only when it is growing in sand. Sitka spruce is badly wind-burnt in the winter and looks awful but grows well. There is a no-grow-zone of at least 1m around *Cortaderia richardii* owing to its scythe-like leaves. All take time to grow and some need a lot of protection when small.

For faster windbreaks we did resort to the plastic kind. However they are expensive and have a tendency to blow away, particularly in wet (i.e. soft) ground. I still recall going out in a force 10 to lay a 30m windbreak flat to stop it blowing away. Ever since, we guy each post in 3 directions. But these windbreaks do work, and give the real windbreaks a chance to grow. Almost as fast is to grow some tall herbaceous plants as they give protection during the summer. We have used peas, broad beans, lovage and Jerusalem artichokes in the veg patch, but best of all is bronze fennel. It grows quickly to form a 2m hedge in three or four years and, although the leaves die back, the woody stems remain to filter the wind in the winter months. We still use it in the veg gardens but more recently have been planting it as a shelter plant around new flower beds to protect the permanent hedge.

Even within the protected areas, the wind can cause fatal damage to newly transplanted plants. We soon learned that autumn planting of shrubs and trees was a recipe for disaster and now always plant in spring in the hope that they will form a good enough anchor to hold them in place for the winter. Even so it is not unknown for plants to take the aerial route to the compost bin. Seeds are

Fig. 7 Established through trial and error

Fig. 8 Herbaceous bed, alder behind

rarely sown directly into the soil (root vegetables are an exception and they are protected by cloches) and the transplants, both flowers and veg, have a plastic bottle (minus top and bottom) placed over them. A word of caution here, sparrows find these ideal perches and take great delight in pecking the beetroot leaves.

On the subject of birds, they are a delight in the garden but they have their down side. Grass clippings, carefully spread between plants for weed suppression, are quickly raked through, burying the plants in the search for a worm. New plantings mean softer soil so the plant is excavated and left to die unless surrounded by a fence of sticks. White plant labels are like red rags, something to be instantly pulled from the ground and discarded. However, the birds produce a lot of guano which must be good for the garden.

About 20 years ago there was a change in our flower growing. Until then we had had the obligatory flower beds around the front of the house where exposure to the elements was greatest and where virtually none of the usual flowering plants would survive. By trial and error we had established *Persicaria affinis, Sedum spectabile, Crocosmia* 'Lucifer' (though we wage war on montbretia which grows just as well), a white fuchsia (probably *Fuchsia magellanica* 'Alba'), geranium (unknown), yellow loosestrife (*Lysimachia punctata)* and a couple of saxifrages, and we supplemented them in summer with alyssum and calendulas. But as the children

© Stuart Oakley

Fig. 9 Fennel hedge, note burn on the escallonia in front

© Stuart Oakley

Fig. 10 Same hedge showing the protected garden behind

started to get older and leave for university, we had more time to spend on the garden. The first project was a herbaceous border. The most sheltered site was above the original potato patch, but the ground was so thin and rocky that nothing would grow. A raised bed was the answer. With the extra protection and drainage we found that we could grow *Euphorbia griffithii* and *E. polychroma*, *Astrantia major*, Japanese anemones, *Ligularia dentata* 'Othello' and many others.

The second project was a mistake. After 15 years or so, we needed to find a new home for the soft fruit. The only sheltered site was at the drier end of the bottom of the hill. For 2 years potatoes were grown to clean the ground (a euphemism for a lot of hard work). The second summer was wet and all the tubers rotted in the ground: the fruit stayed where it was, and the patch became our first bog garden to house arum lily (*Zantedeschia aethiopica)*, *Meconopsis betonicifolia*, *M. napaulensis*, *Eupatorium purpureum*, several astilbes of different colours, *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon', day lilies and several thalictrums – all of which liked the extra moisture and shelter, but were able to survive if the rains stopped.

After these developments, others have followed as we have learned more, needed less land for hay, and became, well, more obsessional. Some projects were carefully planned and slow to implement, giving time for windbreaks to grow to give some protection from the outset, such as the lily-rich (second) patio with our only surviving ceanothus. Others were developed more quickly so fennel was incorporated into the planting scheme for quick protection, to be removed later when the hedge – spirea, fuchsia or escallonia – had grown sufficiently. Some were accidents, such as the trailer of manure which stalled on the drive and emptied to the side (we traded hay for manure). It was spread, covered and left for two years before uncovering to make a new bed where restios, hydrangeas and *Primula vialii* stand out. Some were desperation, like the area of rushes in the hay field that we could not kill. Three years of black plastic did the job, but as we didn't need the hay

Fig. 11 Extreme shelter allows quite delicate plants to grow

anymore it was carefully planted up (as we gracefully sank to our ankles) with water lovers – hostas, geums, marsh marigolds, irises (*sibirica* and *ensata)*, purple loosestrife, skunk cabbage, *Rodgersia* and *Darmera peltata*. We have planted directly into the grass with varying success. The daffodil hill is beautiful in spring, also the *Lysimachia punctata* in the summer; less so is the *Alchemilla mollis*. Along the road, in the wet, are *Gunnera manicata, Carex pendula* and willows for winter colour – all getting there but not yet impressive.

Our experience has shown that it is possible to garden in the Hebrides by a combination of carefully looking for plants which can survive, and changing the conditions to allow for a greater range of plants to grow. We have found a wide range of plants, many from the southern continents, which can tolerate our conditions, and by changing the conditions using windbreaks, raised beds and soil improvements we have extended the range even more. We can grow plants which are marginally hardy, like the olearias, but not those that like hot summers (echinaceas) or dry winters (*Pulsatilla vulgaris* to name but one). Late-flowering plants are often destroyed by the wind, so *Cortaderia richardii* is better than *C. selloana*. We have created a maze of quite small enclosed spaces, each with its own character and environment, and full of delightful flowers. Each plant had its label but, what with the wind and birds removing them and bleaching by the weather, they can be hard to identify. We can usually get the genus, often the species and, for the some, the variety. We must try to do better with this.

In 2004 we were touched by the plight of people in Darfur and decided to open our garden. The generosity of the many locals who came was staggering, and we now open under Scotland's Gardens Scheme each summer. We would welcome a visit from any HPS member – maybe you could help us identify some of our plants. But we will still shake our collection box at you.

Stuart Oakley, a retired biology teacher, intends to devote more time to his new greenhouse and to developing those untamed parts of this garden, aptly named Leathad Ard, Gaelic for 'Steep Hill'.