



Fig. 1 Bluebell stand with heather and gorse behind

Seaside gardening on Islay

Richard and Mavis Gulliver

When we tell friends that our island garden included low cliffs, a small shingle beach and a sea-washed shore, most of them are filled with envy. It's true that our setting was splendid, and we enjoyed the scents and sounds of the sea, but our choice of garden plants was limited to those able to withstand salt-laden winds. Thus, gardening

with native or adapted plants seemed the best way forward.

Our home from 1997 to 2017 was on the south coast of the Hebridean Isle of Islay. The 1.2-acre plot which surrounded our bungalow was roughly divided into three sections. The upper section, between house and road, consisted of short grassland, edged with borders of hardy perennials. Below the house, rough grassland fell away to an expanse of dense bracken, and thence via low cliffs to the shore.

Our aim was to encourage native species by collecting local seed. But we had to clear the bracken first; a challenge that we tackled with the fern-specific herbicide Asulox. Two cheerful golf greenkeepers arrived on the appointed Saturday, and we were surprised to see them pouring a little

Elsan toilet chemical into their knapsack sprayers. The wisdom of their actions was soon apparent. On uneven ground, with bracken up to shoulder height, smell was the best way of telling which areas had been sprayed.

What replaced the bracken? The first year it was common sorrel, *Rumex acetosa*, which we reduced by mowing. The next year, an expanse of bluebells arose (fig. 1), presumably from the 'liberated' seed bank. These made an impressive sight with the sparkling sea beyond. The bracken was not easily beaten though, and annual spot treatments were needed thereafter. In following years, we removed self-sown brambles where possible, and cut back rosebay willowherb after its initial burst of colour.



Fig. 2



Fig. 3 Garden in July

In autumn and winter we cut off arching bramble stems before the tips could take root. During the year we made paths to different parts of the garden by regular mowing; and in late autumn we would mow the whole area, apart from the heather-covered rocky outcrops.

The bluebells proliferated (fig. 2). It was surprising to visitors who were used to seeing bluebell woods, to learn that even denser carpets of blue can occur in treeless, north-western areas adjacent to the sea.

Immediately next to the house on the seaward side, we established a border with cottage garden plants such as *Alchemilla mollis*, *Leucanthemum x superbum* and assorted geraniums. By August, the rough grassland between mown paths near the house (fig. 3) was blue with devil's-bit scabious, *Succisa pratensis*.

Upon our arrival in Islay we were greeted by the cheery white flowers of *Ornithogalum umbellatum*. This plant flowered for us every year, holding its own among grass and ground elder (fig. 4). We

were also fond of the starry flowers of ramsons, *Allium ursinum*, but soon learnt of their campaign to take over any and all available space in the borders. This particular allium does not make bulbils, but its seed production and dispersal are super-efficient.

Following an island tradition, we brought woolly-leaved apple mint (*Mentha x villosa* in our case) from the garden of a long-abandoned croft at the foot of Islay's highest hill. The transplant did well, unlike the resident marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*,



Fig. 4 Beauty and the beast. *Ornithogalum umbellatum* with ground-elder



Fig. 5 Elecampane. Two tight buds indicate the long flowering period

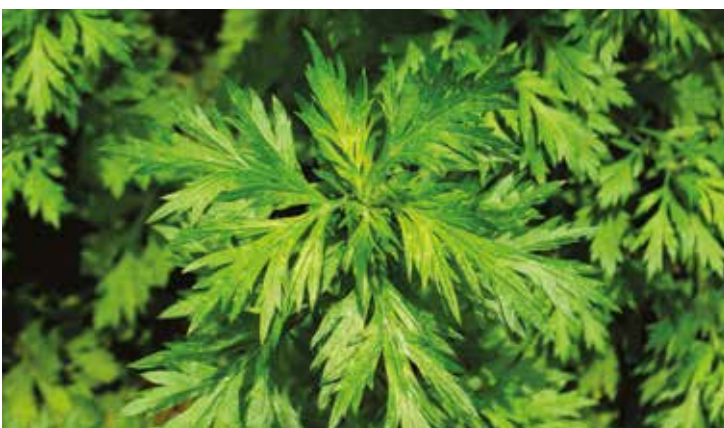


Fig. 6 Geometrically incised leaves of mugwort in June

whose diminutive stature seemed to say ‘I don’t really want to be here’.

Elecampane, *Inula helenium*, has been grown for many years in Scottish gardens. ‘The fresh Root being candied, or dried, and powder’d, mix’d with Hony or Sugar, is very good in a Difficulty of Breath’ng, an Asthma and an old Cough’¹. The imminent clearance of a roadside stand of elecampane gave us the opportunity to obtain some plants. Taking no chances with the wind, we planted them by a south-facing stone wall, where we could admire their sunny faces every summer (fig. 5).

While on Islay we became known as the botanists for ‘The Botanist’ gin. We spent three years selecting Islay plants for use in its preparation, together with the master distiller Jim McEwan, who worked long and hard to develop the attributes of this premium quality gin. Between the first distillation in 2010 and when we left the island in 2017, we gathered and processed all the Islay botanicals for each production run. We also introduced a selection of these plants into our own garden. Among them, sweet cicely, *Myrrhis odorata*, has wonderful liquorice-scented foliage. It flowers in May and June, and is very good at self-seeding.

¹J Pechey *The Compleat Herbal of Physical Plants*, 1694. Quoted in *The Englishman’s Flora*, Geoffrey Grigson, Paladin, 1975

By contrast tansy, *Tanacetum vulgare*, has a long growing season and spreads by short stolons. Lemon balm, highly favoured by bees, performed well and made a delightful tea. We planted mugwort, *Artemisia vulgaris*, along one boundary in the upper garden; its leaves have an impressive geometric quality (fig. 6), and the rather sombre inflorescences release a distinctive aromatic scent when rubbed between the fingers. We know though from many conversations, that the perception of scent varies greatly from person to person, so this is a subjective description.

Our involvement in ecological work for Scottish Water allowed us, in September 2005, to rescue marsh orchids from an Islay site which was being levelled for a new waste water treatment works². Most of these plants resembled the northern marsh-orchid *Dactylorhiza purpurella* (fig. 7), but were noticeably taller, with more leaves. We considered them to be purple-flowered hybrids between this orchid and the heath spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza maculata*, having observed the latter at the proposed water treatment site. Heath spotted-orchids were also present in small numbers in our garden, and in larger numbers in a nearby field. Occasionally, where this



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Fig. 7 *Dactylorhiza purpurella*. Photographs often render the colour too red

orchid occurs near northern marsh-orchids, a giant lilac-flowered form appears (fig. 8). This impressive plant became a regular feature in our garden. The scientific name of this hybrid is *Dactylorhiza x formosa* – formosa from the Latin ‘formosus’ meaning beautiful, or handsome – a highly appropriate specific epithet.

Our mowing regime allowed our northern marsh-orchids and hybrids (both purple and lilac-flowered forms) to flower and seed. We only ever had a single appearance of the pyramidal orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, but the landward side of the house was colonised by the green-flowered common twayblade *Neottia ovata*, whose numbers increased every year.

We collected and sowed seed from Islay’s varied

habitats, and each year we searched our garden for newly established plants. Meadow vetchling, *Lathyrus pratensis* (which is hard-seeded), took a few years to establish, while red campion and cow parsley produced flowering plants relatively quickly. We spread wild carrot seeds, harvested



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Fig. 8 *Dactylorhiza x formosa*

²Gulliver, R & M ‘Orchid Conservation Activities on the Isle of Islay’. *Journal of the Hardy Orchid Society*. Vol. 3 No. 3 (41) July 2006 pp. 86-88.



Fig. 9 Fox-and-cubs with grassland flowers

from cliff-side locations, sometimes supplementing the areas we sowed with a dressing of sand or grit. The following years it was fascinating to watch their transition from convex white umbels to deeply concave crow's nests, containing many spiky seeds. Our wild carrots did particularly well near rocky outcrops, which were also favoured by the native goldenrod, *Solidago virgaurea*.

The variability of common names of plants is a fascinating topic in itself. One example is the prosaically named orange hawkweed *Pilosella aurantiaca*, more interestingly known as 'fox-and-cubs', or better yet 'grim the collier' – probably from the resemblance of its black hairs to those on the

chin of an unshaven miner. We take this plant with us whenever we move. On Islay it provided a bright and welcome contrast to daisies, white clover and orchids in the grassland (fig. 9). The poor soil, together with our mowing regime, encouraged the buttercups to flower, but curbed their vigorous growth. Orange re-appeared in late summer, in the showy blooms of montbretia, *Crocospmia x crocosmiiflora*, accompanied by some small stands of rosebay willowherb which we allowed to flower, but not to seed.

Wind is ever-present in the Hebrides. For shelter along one garden boundary, we used the conventional local hedging plants *Fuchsia magellanica* and 'hedge hebe'³, *Veronica x franciscana*. Hedge hebe,

having a long flowering period, provided many months of colour. But even these hardy species were no match for feral goats, whose ramblings along the shore brought them to our neighbourhood. In response we put up a 1m-high wooden fence between the upper garden with its more delicate plants, and the lower, wilder garden. The goats were reluctant to jump over the fence because other gardens around us were more easily accessible to them. This new fence was no barrier to roe deer, but fortunately their visits were infrequent; so they remained 'cute' rather than 'pests' to us, and our roses were unharmed.

We raised the height of a section of boundary fence in a relatively sheltered spot near the bungalow, and put in pink and white forms of *Clematis montana*. This fence was parallel to wind coming from the sea, and the soil here had an appreciable mineral content. The clematis, planted 'more in hope than expectation', performed well. *Hesperis matronalis*, rescued from a roadside gravel heap, complemented the floral cover along the lower parts of the fence (fig. 10), and added its own delightful scent.

The high humidity near the sea has twin benefits. It magnifies natural scents and gives a good dew-fall,

³C Stace, *New Flora of the British Isles*, fourth edition, C&M Floristics, 2019



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Fig. 10 *Hesperis matronalis* with *Clematis montana*

especially when night skies are clear. In general our winter weather was mild, snow very rare and frost uncommon. The freedom from spring frosts may not have been entirely good news though. One belief we hold is that the mild but poorly lit winters mean that some perennials use more of their reserves in respiration than would be the case in more continental climates, and therefore often fail to thrive.

Two woody seaside plants performed very differently for us in the upper part of the garden. Sea-buckthorn, *Hippophae rhamnoides*, grew rapidly, displaying attractive

sea-mist foliage and orange berries, much loved by blackbirds. Next, there appeared many suckers: in one direction they came up in the lawn, up to 3m away from the parents; in the other, they grew up through the tarmac drive. This action signed their death warrant.

Nearby, on another boundary, we planted *Rosa rugosa*, using mycorrhizal fungi granules. Despite this, they took many years to establish. Eventually though, they did well, the majority of them dark pink-flowered, with some white and paler pink-flowered ones for variety. They also spread into the lawn, but

were controlled by repeated mowing. Looking out of the kitchen window one October day, we were delighted to see a hawfinch – an extremely rare visitor to Islay – devouring their hips, which were ripe by this time. Incidentally these hips, first steeped in alcohol and later filtered out, make a delicious tincture for after-dinner consumption.

After many happy years on Islay, we were fortunate to sell our house to a couple who are also keen on wildlife gardening. However much or little they change it, we are sure they will get as much pleasure from gardening by the sea as we did. 🌸

Richard and Mavis Gulliver now live in Shropshire, and give illustrated talks on their various experiences. They are on the HPS list of speakers; subjects include *The plants in The Botanist gin*, *An introduction to wildlife gardening*, *Our island garden* and more. For further details contact RichardLGulliver@gmail.com and mavisgulliver@googlemail.com.