

NIHGC Conference 2008
Visit to the Gardens of Liam & Nora Green
Written by Rae McIntyre

A Green Garden Gem

Green, not surprisingly, is the predominant colour in the stylish garden of Liam and Norah Greene in the suburbs of Derry City. Liam, who does all of the gardening, claims he is no plantsman; that's not quite accurate because there are plants in plenty and he is knowledgeable about them but presumably what he means is that he doesn't go in for displays of flowers. The strange thing is that the garden is so well designed and so beautifully maintained that you don't realise this until Liam tell you. I first saw the garden in early November, a testing time for any garden, but it looked almost as spectacular then as it does in summer.

Ten fastigiated golden yews *Taxus baccata* "Aurea", five on each side, form a guard of honour up to the green front door. This is the only part of the garden where there is grass.

The front garden is fairly typical of many older Irish gardens and looks most appropriate as an approach to the large, elegant Georgian house that is called Hampstead Hall. Take the driveway round the east side of the house and you cross over a Japanese bridge over the top of a garden that wouldn't look out of place in Kyoto. Authentic Japanese gardens over the top concentrate on three elements – stone, water and a fairly narrow new palette of plants – and the Greene's have done likewise. The stone is there in the form of rocks which have been placed to form different levels in what would otherwise be flat ground and to make stepping stones along gravel pathways. There are areas of gravel not raked in symbolic patterns as they would be in Japan but then that symbolism would be meaningless to Western eyes. An essential for any garden claiming to be Japanese is a large stone lantern and one is placed beside the water.

The water is in a curving pool dominated by an island. It is running water and is enhanced by the sound of a low cascade underneath the Japanese bridge. I was convinced this was a natural feature but Liam said it was operated by a well concealed circulating pump. The island has one tree, a laburnum with five stems that look like dancers who have just stopped to rest for a few moments. It is surrounded by a ground-covering carpet of *Helxine soleirolii* known commonly as "Mind-your-own-business" because of its tendency to spread where it's not wanted. Confining it to an island surrounded by rocks and running water is the only way to ensure it will stay put. Overlooking the island is a Japanese teahouse which Liam hopes to enlarge sometime in the future.

The planting is mostly of evergreens with shrubs such as pines which are so prevalent in Japanese gardens, and, of course, Japanese azaleas which flower in May and June. Liam has recently acquired a specimen of *Podocarpus salignus* with narrow evergreen leaves like those of a willow.

NIHGC Conference 2008
Visit to the Gardens of Liam & Nora Green
Written by Rae McIntyre

The deciduous planting is mainly of Japanese maples but there is also a very large oak that leans slightly over the pool. This was obviously here long before the Japanese garden was created but it is highly appropriate for this city garden because Derry (Doire) means oak.

A gate at the end of this garden leads into a service area and it has been given a novel treatment by Liam. Completely covering the metal of an ordinary gate are “pipes” of bamboo about 4 inches in diameter which he says are very strong and almost indestructible. Continue round past this gate and you enter the courtyard, a quadrangle surrounded by the beautiful outbuildings which, from Georgian times up until the early part of the 20th century, would have been stables on the ground floor with servant accommodation on the first floor. When the Greene’s bought the property in 1979 these buildings were a shambles but they’ve worked hard to have them restored to, possibly better than their former glory. Against two of the walls grows the evergreen *Magnolia grandiflora* which seems to bear flowers sporadically most of the year. The blooms are globular, creamy-white with an unforgettable fresh, lemony scent, one that asks to be sniffed deeply.

On the west side of the house is the Italian garden. As with the Japanese garden the Greenes have made diligent efforts to make it as enthusiastic as possible. Italian garden style originated in Ancient Rome when rich Romans designed them as an extension of their houses for outdoor living. So there was plenty of masonry with the walls built to create a comfortable microclimate, within their shelter, stone staircases, balustrades, pools (heated or unheated), level paving that was easy to walk on, a pavilion in which to dine, all softened by greenery that was clipped and controlled. Tall slender Italian cypresses were ubiquitous. All these elements are present in the Greenes garden.

It is well sheltered by brick walls that were built in the Eighties when Liam bought the bricks from bomb demolition sites in Derry during the Troubles. These provide ideal conditions for the numerous climbers and wall shrubs that benefit from the warmth. There is yet another *Magnolia grandiflora* blooming here and *Carpenteria californica* scents the air with its beautiful white flowers. A fig tree actually bears large fruit- one of the very few I have seen doing so in this country.

The Italian garden is on two levels with stone steps giving access between them. Both levels are very formal. In the upper one low box hedges enclose planting areas around the walls. In the centre there is a square box-edged bed in which four cypresses (imported from Italy) and four balls are surrounded by gravel. A planter, filled with scarlet geraniums, standing on a plinth is particularly noticeable amongst the prevalent greenness. A raised trellised pavilion, approached by steps, has an inviting set of table and chairs inside. It’s one of several sets placed round this part of the garden so that al fresco meals can be enjoyed in the warmest, sunniest spot.

NIHGC Conference 2008
Visit to the Gardens of Liam & Nora Green
Written by Rae McIntyre

The lower level has a square pool set in the paving. It is backed by two towering columns of gold-toned cypresses. They were, believe it or not, *Cupressocyparis Leylandii* “Castlewellan Gold” those most maligned of trees. Kept slim and clipped they are spectacular. In this lower level there are also some fine specimens of topiary.

It’s obvious that to keep this garden in a state of near-perfection a high level of maintenance is ongoing. Liam admits to being absolutely ruthless about cutting back sprawlers and shrubs that are threatening to engulf others.

Gardening is a process not an end product so I asked him what was next on his creative agenda. A vegetable garden, he said. It will probably be a French- influenced potager very formally laid out and, seeing Liam’s very high standards elsewhere, I am sure it will be outstanding.

Rae McIntyre