

# Northern Ireland Gardens thro the Four Seasons

by Trevor Edwards

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NI Gardens through the Four Seasons - *There is always a garden close by!*

## Spring

Early spring starts in February/March for the **snowdrop enthusiasts** or **galanthophiles** as they have become known, with the annual homage to the displays at many of the Parks & Gardens such as the Argory in County Armagh, Rowallane or Mount Stewart in County Down.

Closely followed in March April by the **Crocus** displays in many of the Council & Forest Parks.

**Daffodils** are also abundant in many public and private parks and gardens over the six counties. However the National Collection is held at the Guy L Wilson daffodil garden in Coleraine, Co. Londonderry. Take a stroll through the rare collection of 400 Irish-bred daffodils and narcissus. The show starts in March with full bloom in mid-April. The garden is a memorial to the local daffodil breeder Guy L Wilson.

Driving through the interesting and varied countryside the hedgerows and trees will be awaking from their winter sleep. Watch out for the abundance of the fragrant & scented yellow flowers of the Gorse (also known as Furze, Fuzz or Whin Bush) in the hedge rows of the small fields. It is said that Kissing is in Season when the Gorse is in flower! Also observe the floriferous masses of 5-petalled white flowers of the Hawthorne *Crataegus monogyna* which ripen to form bright red clusters of berries, watch out for the "Fairy Trees". White 5-petalled flowers of Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa* will appear in April-March, before the leaves (followed by purplish fruits (sloes) with a powdery bloom. Blackthorn is used in the making of walking sticks and the tradition Irish weapon the "**Shalaly Stick**". Watch out for the swaths of dusky Blue Bells in the Ancient Woodlands.

In the city of Belfast, adjacent to the George Best City Airport is the Belfast City Council's Parks Department controlled Victoria Park which is always a riot of colour of crocus and daffodil bedding displays, as it happens conveniently viewable from the main road (A2).

Mount Stewart and Rowallane gardens are a **must see** at anytime of the year. However spring & early summer are when the Rhododendrons create their amazing **stand-out**.

**EARLY SUMMER** heralds Apple Blossom time in Armagh. County Armagh is known as **Orchard County**, and every year Ireland's oldest city celebrates its apples with festivals and apple tours. For a visual delight simply take a drive along the

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Highways and Byways at a time when the hills are alive with the pink of blossom. If you get thirsty for a *garden visit* then the gardens of the Argory & Ardress House are nearby. Ardress has an attractive garden with scenic woodland and riverside walks. The Argory is a neo-classical 'Irish Gentry' house virtually unchanged since 1900 also with garden, woodland and riverside walks with wonderful sweeping views over the County Armagh countryside. At you leisure you can enjoy refreshments in the properties award-winning Lady Ada's Tea-room. Enjoy!

Each year in May time there is an annual almost pilgrimage to Rowallane to gaze upon the magnificent spreading branches of the handkerchief tree, *Davidia involucrate*. Visitors will also find the original *Chaenomeles x superba* 'Rowallane' and the famous *Hypericum* 'Rowallane' hybrid which began as a seedling self-sown in the Rock Garden.

For those interested in natural flora & wildlife (and even the exceptional diverse Geology of Northern Ireland) spring is a good time to visit the Sand Dunes (and 'HIGH' Sand Dunes) on the coasts of counties Antrim & Down. Intriguingly the dunes systems are only found in the six northern coastal counties of Ireland! Apart from the Wild Pansy *Viola tricolour*, & the Common Dog-Violet *Viola riviniana* you will be thrilled by the charming sheltered colonies of the quietly protected Primrose *Primula vulgaris*.

**Ballywalter Park** has been in the ownership of the Mulholland family for over 150 years the House & Gardens are a hidden treasure tucked away on the east coast of the Ards Peninsula. The estate is steeped in history so we must restrict ourselves (for the moment) to those of horticultural interests. In the winter of 1846/7 no less 93,500 trees & shrubs were planted. This was shortly followed by further plantings of shelter belts to provide protection from the easterly winds.

In the 1900's the then incumbent Lord Dunleath, Charles Mulholland contributed significantly to the gardens. He established a notable collection of rhododendrons, shrubs and conifers which remain and give pleasure to this day. He did much experimentation in the crossing of rhododendrons and perhaps his most successful hybrid was **Rhododendron Lady Dunleath**, a winter hardy cross between *Arboreum* var. *Kermesinum* and *Elliottii* which carries striking deep red flowers from late February through to the end of May and beyond.

Ballywalter Park is positioned a short drive to the south of Mount Stewart and not far from the fascinating and spectacular Strangford ferry crossing from Portaferry to Strangford town which is close to the National Trust property of Castle Ward. The estate property is a must for those interested in researching Garden History

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with its woodland, lakeside and parkland walks with stunning viewpoints. It will also captivate those interested in Architecture with its one Classical and one Gothic facade.

## SUMMER

The Richardson's Walled Garden at Greenmount College in County Antrim is worth a visit at any time of the year. The Walled Garden was redeveloped for the millennium and was one of the largest private/public sector initiatives to happen in Northern Ireland. Big on the WOW factor! Indeed a Hidden Gem.

On a trip up the *must see* (according to The Lonely Planet travel guidebook) Antrim Coast Road, perhaps on route to the geologically fascinating Giants Causeway, if its early May why not call into **Glenarm Castle Gardens** for the annual Tulip Festival. The gardeners have planted over 8,500 tulip bulbs throughout the Walled Garden, which are sure to provide a vibrant display throughout the month of May.

After your visit to UNESCO World Heritage site, "The Giants Causeway" consider making a visit to the nearby **Benvarden Garden**. The historic private demesne garden of Benvarden on the banks of the River BUSH is only minutes away. Incredibly the garden has been in continuous cultivation since the 1780's. In his book, *Gardens of Ireland*, Terence Reeves-Smyth describes Benvarden as having one of the - "*few fully-maintained walled gardens in Ireland and undoubtedly the best in private hands*". The River Bush is used by the nearby Old Bushmills Distillery - the World's Oldest Licensed Whiskey Distillery - whilst the distillery does not have a garden per say they usually have good bedding displays in old whiskey barrels .....worth a visit for one reason or the other wouldn't you say! Note that in Ireland 'Whiskey' is spelt with an E, not 'Whisky' as in Scotland without the E. The easy way to remember it for the all important pub quiz is that "there is an E in Ireland and no E in Scotland". Also, in Ireland the spirit is distilled 3 times whereas in Scotland it is distilled twice!

Still on the North Coast, if time permits why not stretch your legs and feast your eyes on the delights of **Portstewart Strand**. In 2000, the acre dune system at Portstewart was included in the **Bann Estuary ASSI** (Area of Special Scientific Interest), for the rare and fragile habitats/wildlife that it supports. In particular many species of butterflies and orchids including the rare Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* have been recorded, and can be viewed from the way marked trails.

Moving away from the north coast back into Co. Down to explore the planting around the 5 acre lake of the **Mount Stewart** garden in summer will always be a botanical delight. Enjoy the majesty of the high eucalypts and the clumps of Cordyline which

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are a favourite throughout Northern Ireland. Summer colour is provided by *watsonias*, *agapanthus* and Red Hot Pokers (*kniphofia*).

Further south a walk around the **Annesley Garden** in July when the "eucryphia walk" is in full flower will lift the heart and soul, a tonic on those balmy summer afternoons.

## AUTUMN

The garden of **Mount Stewart** produces a brilliant autumn colour display from the many *maples*, *eucryphias*, *myrtles* and other trees surrounding the lake - a photographer's paradise! A climb up the gentle steps to the elevated precincts of the private burial ground known as Tír Na nÓg (Land of the Ever-Young) affords views over the lake & gardens. Or a short walk through the wooded hillside to the nearby 'Temple of the Winds' affords stunning panoramic views over Strangford Lough to the Mountains of Mourne. Even more stunning if you happen to be there on a clear evening as the low autumn sun is setting. Awesome!

All of the aforesaid mentioned gardens will entertain you with their autumn foliage colours but a visit to the **National Arboretum** at Castlewellan Forest Park and the **Annesley Garden** contained within will be a truly *wonder* filling and memorable experience as the trees begin to store the sugars in preparation for Winter! In the Forest Park is the Peace Maze, the **world's longest and largest Hedge Maze**.

Trust me! One of the best kept secrets of the rural landscapes in Northern Ireland is **The Ballymoney Beeches**. The 101 beech trees along Bregagh Road (near Stranocum) are historically important and a prominent feature in the local landscape. It is thought that they were planted in the late 1700s on what was then the avenue to Gracehill house, now Gracehill Golf Club. Unfortunately they are now approaching the limit of their natural lifespan. Hopefully there is still time to visit this photographer's dream location. Whether it is autumn, winter, spring or summer they are worth the search to find this quiet avenue of natural structure & colour! *A Satellite Navigator or local knowledge may prove to be essential!*

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## WINTER

The many walks in Tullymore Forest Park & gardens with superb views of the Mountains of Mourne will exercise the body and serve to top-up the visual memory bank for winter. Winter is also a revealing time to revisit intricate and mature gardens to unvale their structure or framework. A good opportunity to learn a little of how to create or replicate a favoured corner or style. As winter progresses towards Spring the excitement and anticipation begins to gather momentum - do not be distracted from visiting the gardens simply because it is winter! In the winter sun, as the bulbs, flowers, trees & shrubs begin to push through to bud it is a great time to start ones voyerism! Winter is also avery creative time for the keen Garden Photographer particularly if one gets a relatively rare snow covering on the ground.....every cloud has a silver lining!

### *Quote from the author Trevor Edwards*

*Having spend most of my working life in Horticulture in Ireland in one form or another I have always found that one of the best ways of learning is from the experience of others. What better way than by visiting as many different gardens as possible thereby experiencing different climates, sizes and styles. I often say "so many gardens not enough time" however in the case of Northern Ireland "there is always a garden close by"!*

*In NI we are blessed with so many gardens within a convenient geographical area with a good unclutterd road network, however when visiting any garden "Once is not enough"!*

*Please note:*

*I have photos of most gardens mentioned in the text - ask and you shall receive!*

*Trevor Edwards a life long self employed Horticulturist is resident in Northern Ireland.*

*Trevor .....*

- is a committed Garden Designer & Consultant.*
- has travelled extensively to experience gardens and plants in many countries.*
- is an experienced Garden Radio & TV Broadcaster and Writer.*
- is recognised for his knowledge of Gardens of Ireland.*

*Trevor is available for Interviews or Speaking engagements!*

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