



Circumnavigating the Emerald Isle

Q & A with AHS Host Keith Tomlinson

How do Ireland's climate and geography influence its garden styles?

As part of the British Isles and greater Doggerland, Ireland emerged from the last Ice Age scoured and glaciated. Not barren for long, a sylvan blanket of green would migrate north and cover the entire region in a moist dark oak-pine forest. Only the highest mountains remained treeless. The post glacial climate and newly formed ocean currents fostered a remarkably mild bastion for these northerly islands. The arrival of Mesolithic hunters marks the earliest human settlements. Over time, human communities grew, ultimately clearing once-lush forests, revealing an emerald landscape dotted with small, forested areas we see today. In isolated west coast locations, a Celtic temperate rainforest developed.

Today's Irish Gardens reflect cultural, religious and modern trends in landscape design while drawing from the island's natural history and evolving climate. Like England, Ireland's environment surprises many visitors with the vast number of relatively tender plants that grow hardily. Such treasures as Tasmanian Tree Ferns and southern Magnolias flourish, particularly in the southwest of the country. Many Rhododendrons and Azaleas bloom in profusion. Combining ornamental plant diversity with numerous historic properties and rolling topography make Irish gardens truly unique.

You've visited gardens in more than 50 countries; how does Ireland compare in terms of botanical richness and garden experience?

Ireland has a nearly endemic garden ethos combining historic sites, landscapes and ornamental horticulture. This ethos is born out of the nation's long history and evolving culture. Most gardens are centered around a historic home, castle or abbey. This lends a unique spatial aspect to the countryside and individual gardens. Urban areas give way to pastoral lands, highlands, rugged seacoasts and numerous national parks. Inlaid among this often undulating geography, the gardens exhibit a floral cornucopia never far removed from the island's culture and history. It's a remarkable meeting of garden aesthetics and architectural antiquity that's distinctly Irish.

How do you approach interpreting gardens for people with different levels of gardening experience?

My approach to interpreting gardens has evolved over decades and different environments. I frequently see gardens as the combination of plant diversity cultivated through the human lens. Whether travelling through lush tropical forests, cactus-rich deserts or windswept alpine summits, we're sure to see many of these plants in garden collections. Every cultivated plant ultimately came from the wild, and its introduction into a garden provides a fascinating story of propagation, botanical exploration, ethnobotany and horticultural expression. Combine this with the creation of gardens through history and you have a grand forum of interpretation!

The most popular avocation in the United States, gardening speaks to the core of the human-nature connection. Anyone at any level can participate. Whether growing that perfect red pepper or marveling at the different butterflies visiting your Salvias, plant life has no equal. As the late Harvard Biologist E. O. Wilson revealed with the Biophilia Hypothesis, we are connected at the most intimate level with nature. More than any other aspect of biodiversity, plants beckon us to explore the unlimited aesthetic appeal of gardening.

What do you hope travelers will take away from this AHS journey?

AHS travel programs are truly unique. When gardeners, horticulturists and plant enthusiasts embark on these journeys, a community of plant lovers converge. Strolling into a new garden nestled in a foreign country is perhaps the ultimate garden travel experience. The garden will be informed by the region's culture, history and climate. New plants are sure to charm while familiar species are recognized with renewed admiration. The Irish gardens and landscapes we'll visit are steeped in history unique to the island.

Landscape design often reflects the cultural evolution of the country. From the scientific collections at the National Botanic Garden in Dublin to the faith inspired Kylemore Abbey in the rugged mountainous west, Irish gardens are ever fascinating. AHS travelers will depart from this journey with a growing list of plants to sow at home and a deep sense of the Irish countryside endowed by antiquity and horticultural splendor.