



*The views are an important part of the garden. Photos © Bennett Smith, Nick Holmes and Lucy Mackenzie.*

## A garden on Mull

Lucy Mackenzie

I grew up on Mull but then moved to Italy, where I lived for 32 years outside Rome. I gardened there, having inherited the love of plants from my mother, but found it frustrating with the heat and lack of rain in the summer months, and after my husband died was very glad to move back to Britain with my daughter, Vittoria. She wanted to become a full-time eventer and the top events and eventers are in this country; I wanted to return to the Isle of Mull and garden. Returning in 2000, I spent five years in Hampshire until my daughter had finished her studies, and made use of this time working in a nursery garden and doing a City and Guilds in horticulture.

### Gardening on a slope

I bought a ruined bothy, Lip na Cloiche ('Edge of the Rock' in Gaelic) on the scenic northwest coast with wonderful views over the Isle of Ulva and the Treshnish Isles. Having built a cottage in traditional style on the one acre plot, I

embarked on making a garden on the steep slope behind it, covered in bracken and gorse. Initially, I made a living gardening for other people, but gradually the garden and my nursery garden took over all my time: building terraces out of stone reclaimed from the old bothy, paths of old bricks and other recycled material, clearing by hand the bracken and gorse and then the turf to allow me to plant up the hillside. I had no master plan, but knew I did not want a 'rhododendron-type' garden like my mother's. I did not have the space and wanted a much longer season of interest. I cannot resist a new plant, and taking advantage of our mild climate wished to experiment growing the widest range of shrubs and herbaceous plants possible. I also love beachcombing and investigating old tips in the winter, and began incorporating my larger finds into the garden and the smaller pieces into my craftwork, with which I occupy my time in the winter evenings.

### On the level

On the relatively level area around the cottage, I have planted raised beds with climbers and wall shrubs to clothe the walls: *Clematis montana* 'Tetrase', *Hydrangea petiolaris*, *Lonicera perichlymenum* 'Serotina' and *Ceanothus* 'Yankee Point'. Below them are herbaceous plants including aconitums, echinops and geraniums, with foliage plants such as *Ricinus communis* 'Carmencita' and *Melianthus major* added in the spring. I have many pots - often galvanized buckets or other reclaimed receptacles - with tulips and other bulbs for spring interest, followed by half hardy salvias, *S. patens* being a particular favourite as I love this shade of blue, glorious velvety purple *Tibouchina urvilleana*, *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop' and other slightly tender long-flowerers.

### The path by the burn

A burn runs down one side of the property, and crossing this on a wooden bridge one follows a path bordered on one side by a boundary hedge of variegated *Griselinia* and on the other by lush planting of *Gunnera*, *Rheum*, *Rodgersia*, *Darmera* and *Astilboides tabularis*, interspersed with the taller accents of *Sanguisorba*, *Ligularia* and *Inula magnifica* and

patches of candelabra primulas and *Meconopsis*. A border under an old ash tree holds shade-lovers including *Disporum*, *Cardamine* and *Syneilesis palmata*.

Another bridge with a driftwood handrail brings one back across the burn and past another raised bed edged with billowing *Nepeta faassenii* before the path starts winding up the steep part of the hill, where the boundary fence is lined with old bedsteads with honeysuckle, climbing golden hop and everlasting sweet pea twining through them. Here the planting is mainly wind-hardy shrubs: a number of different *Olearia* species, *Ozothamnus*, *Hebe*, *Cistus*, *Euryops*, *Drimys lanceolata* and *Buddleja loricata* underplanted with ground cover such as *Pachysandra terminalis*, *Acaena* 'Blue Haze', *Salix nakamuraana* var. 'Yezoalpina' and *Cotoneaster dammeri*. At the top of the hill one pauses not only to catch one's breath, but to enjoy the glorious view out to Ulva, the Treshnish Isles to the west and Ben More, the highest mountain on Mull, to the east. Benches are placed underneath rambling roses on reclaimed rope swags, and this area is planted with dramatic *Eryngium pandanifolium*,



*The house is at the bottom of the garden on the only flat ground.*



*Ropes and timber provide structure and frame the planting.*



*Recycled materials add interest through their colour and textures.*

various *Kniphofia* including *K. northiae*, *Acanthus*, *Agapanthus* 'Loch Hope', *Sedum telephium* 'Red Cauli' and, most striking of all, towering *Echium pininiana* and *E. wildpretii*, both of which have flowered spectacularly this year as a result of two mild winters.

### Downhill

The path then winds down past more shrub planting, passing a thyme seat set above a step inset with pieces of old blue and white china. Surprisingly, *Thymus lanuginosus* does best in our damp climate. You then pass my wonderful Alitex greenhouse. This is invaluable for cuttings and tender plants in the winter, when it is heated to a minimum of 4C, and for tomatoes in the summer. My little potager is the only formal part of the garden. It comprises four raised beds with a central tepee of purple French beans over a driftwood 'sculpture' and is full to the brim, as it provides almost all my vegetables for the entire year. I start plants off in the greenhouse and grow peas, beans and sweetcorn for the summer, purple sprouting broccoli, leeks, ruby chard, cavolo nero and

Brussels sprouts 'Red Rubine' for the winter. Courgettes flourish elsewhere on my compost bins. I find I can grow all I require with no need for an unsightly polytunnel. Below the potager are a few ballerina and stepover fruit trees and a line of raspberries. Another path follows the line of the wall bounding the road, lined by more borders of perennials including *Agastache*, *Cirsium rivulare* and *Salvia caradonna*, and small shrubs that do not block the view from the cottage. Red and white valerian and *Erigeron karvinskianus* billow from the drystone retaining walls.

Back at the main gate, my sale plants are laid out on tables made of old doors, with my nursery area behind. I propagate a wide range of shrubs and perennials from the garden, including *Griselinia*, *Escallonia*, willow and *Fuchsia magellanica* for hedging and windbreaks. Plant labels are made out of razor shells, and I hand paint all my signs on pieces of driftwood.

I am fortunate in that the garden faces south-west and thus enjoys the sun all day. The steep



Half hardy perennials in pots; Looking down on the potager.



*The greenhouse is also on the lower level.*



*Form, texture and leaf colour all contribute to the overall effect.*

slope allows the heavy rainfall to drain away quickly. We are battered by gales in winter. Those from the northwest are sometimes salt-laden and blacken many plants, but although I have hedges of *Escallonia macrantha* to the east and *Griselinia* to the west, I have avoided blocking any of my views: the plants must, in my mind, take second place to the view and as they grow they protect each other. *Griselinia* I find particularly useful and attractive as it always looks fresh.

I am often asked how I feed the plants on such a steep slope; I don't. I plant everything in with a handful of blood, fish and bone, or maybe some seaweed, but I do not believe in regular feeding. I feel it only encourages weak growth, which will be unable to withstand the wind. Vegetable beds, however, are given a layer of seaweed in winter, and I incorporate seaweed into new raised beds and borders. I spread a thin layer of home-made compost on all the lower level borders in late winter, but chiefly for aesthetic reasons.

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*Lucy Mackenzie was born and brought up on Mull, then went to Italy aged 18. She married but returned to the UK after the death of her husband. Their daughter Vittoria is now a top international event rider for Italy. Lucy says she has no qualifications as they were considered unseemly when she was a girl. She has done almost every job under the sun from stacking supermarket shelves to being a travelling shoe salesperson in the USA to cleaning hotel bathrooms to being the designer Valentino's assistant to working in Longstock Nursery Garden where she spent most of her time scraping liverwort off the Myxex.*

*For more information on Mull see [www.holidaymull.co.uk](http://www.holidaymull.co.uk). The garden is open from dawn to dusk all year round. There is no entrance charge but there is a collection box which helps local charities. B&B is available.*

