

Words **Antoinette Galbraith** Photographs **Ray Cox**

# Natural selection

Lucy Mackenzie's garden and nursery on the Isle of Mull demonstrate the wide range of plants that grow on the west coast

**L**IP NA Cloiche – the name means 'Edge of the Rock' in Gaelic – sits in a breathtaking position on the north-west coast of the Isle of Mull, overlooking Loch Tuath and the Isle of Ulva. Only a single-track road and 300 yards of grassy field separate the house from the rocky shores of the loch, where the rise and fall of the tide and the ever-changing Highland light ensure dramatic views. The idyllic picture is completed by a garden that is packed with a wide and eclectic range of plants chosen for long-season interest.

Lucy Mackenzie, a Muileach – the term used for someone born and bred on the island – bought the site 10 years ago when she returned from Italy with her daughter Vittoria following the death of her husband. "I bought a steeply sloping plot with nothing except a ruined bothy and started from there," she says. "In Italy I missed the green fields and wanted to return to my roots."

She lived first in the south and spent holidays on Mull, as she looked after Vittoria. Her daughter is now 24 and a talented three-day event rider, who is representing Italy in the Beijing Olympics on her horse, Rock Model.

Preparing for her new life on Mull, she studied for a City and Guilds qualification in horticulture and spent three years working in a nursery garden. "I wanted to gain all the experience I could before starting my own garden and nursery. Once Vittoria was independent, I moved to Mull permanently."

Her aim was to demonstrate the wide range of different plants that grow on the west coast. "My mother had a wonderful garden here on Mull, but it was a typical glen garden that was chiefly planted with marvellous species rhododendrons," she says. "Like so many on the west coast, it was a spring garden and looked a bit forlorn later in the year." She also feels that smaller gardens can be overwhelmed by large rhododendrons and wanted to offer an alternative.

The bothy was demolished and replaced by a new house, which blends so well into its surroundings that people often assume it has been there for 100 years. The stones provided material for the boundary and retaining walls. The latter create planting areas on the steep slope – "the wonky ones built by me". With unflagging energy and determination, she reclaimed the land, hacking away at the bracken and whins that cover the hillside. "The whins self-seed everywhere – they are much worse than mustard and cress."



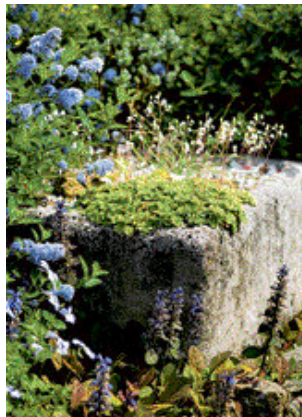
**Above:** the greenhouse is an elegant aluminium structure. **Right:** fork handles hide among alliums by the front porch of the house

The garden evolved without a firm plan. "It is neither a designed nor a fashionable garden. It has grown in response to the landscape and the acquisition of plants that I cannot resist." The resulting layout includes an informal lawn backed by compact shrubs, a formal potager and a tiny orchard. A network of paths cross a picturesque burn and wind up the hill between beds of plants and shrub-planted slopes to a seating area at the top. The latter has stunning views towards the Treshnish Islands to the west and Ben More to the east.

The only nod to formality is the symmetrical potager. It is divided into four beds edged with chives and filled with vegetables such as celeriac, salsify and scorzonera, as well as more usual peas, lettuce and courgettes. Tomatoes are grown in a greenhouse, an elegant aluminium structure. It is guaranteed against the gales and Lucy's "main extravagance – a present



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Top: the garden overlooks Loch Tuath and the Isle of Ulva. Left: a home-made mosaic table. Above from left: saxifrage grows in a stone planter; plant labels are made from small pieces of driftwood. Below: the symmetrical potager is divided into beds edged with flowering chives and marigolds



to myself". Heated to a minimum of 6°C in winter, it is a useful place to escape from lashing winter rain and where she spends many hours propagating.

She is passionate about beachcombing and salvaging treasures, and her finds have dictated the irregular layout of beds and paths. Quirky pieces of driftwood collected from the beach shape newly planned beds, accent corners and create focal points. Plant labels are made from razor shells and smaller pieces of driftwood, and she makes cards and other craft items to sell in her tiny shop.

"I use driftwood and reclaimed materials around



## Garden Tips

In association with Dobbies Garden Centres

### Scaling New Heights in the Garden

Climbing plants offer the gardener a wealth of exciting possibilities and bring a touch of the dramatic to any planting scheme whether grown over trellis or a pergola, against the house itself or used to screen an unsightly wall or fence. There is a huge array of different types, so whatever you are after – showy flowers, beautiful scents or all-year-round interest – there are plenty to choose from.

- Plants suitable for covering walls include climbing hydrangeas, Clematis, Honeysuckles and climbing roses. Russian vine, aptly nicknamed 'mile-a-minute' gives really quick results but can be a bit invasive if not attended to regularly.
- The micro-climate created near south facing walls can provide enough shelter to grow some stunning varieties including Passion Flowers and bougainvillea, bringing a touch of the tropics to any display.
- Pergolas, arches, and arbours can be wrapped in scented flowers such as Honeysuckle and Jasmine, and the pretty flowering Morning Glory to create stunning features, or grow these in containers to add height to a patio display.
- Climbing plants can act as ground cover as they span the soil or any low lying structures with ease to make interesting garden features. Ivy is probably the best climber to act as ground cover.
- Flowering climbers threaded through trees or shrubs create the fringes of both types of plants, while drab boundary hedges can be transformed into beautiful flowery screens with the addition of Clematis and climbing roses amongst others.
- Virginia Creeper and Boston Ivy are great climbers to add a splash of autumn colour as their leaves turn a dramatic crimson. Winter Jasmine produces bright yellow blooms even in the depth of winter.



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the garden, partly because they integrate with the surroundings and partly because I feel these bits of metal – such as bedsteads and grates – are part of our heritage and should not be thrown away. They make great borders and edging materials.”

Bags of seaweed are dragged back from the shore and added to home-made compost and a supply of local manure to enrich the basically good soil. Laverder Pekin bantams roam freely – “with their feathery legs, they can’t scuff too much”.

At Lip na Cloiche, the slope ensures good drainage, the garden is almost frost-free and, despite its very exposed position, most plants thrive in the damp mild climate, including *Pittosporum tobira*, *echiums*, *teucriums* and *Sollya heterophylla*. At the top of the hill – which is reached by a gravel path punctuated by benches – she is experimenting with little-used varieties of wind-hardy shrubs, such as *brachyglottis*, *ozothamnus*, *euryops* and lesser-known *olearias*.

Gardening on Mull is much more fun than gardening in Rome, she says.

“There I gardened on a small scale, but it is so hot in the summer that you are always watering, and by the end of May the countryside is brown and burnt. In Scotland plants flower for much longer. I always yearned to come back one day.”

She won’t be going to Hong Kong to watch Vittoria in the Olympics, she says. “Sadly it’s too far, too expensive and too hot,” she says. “But I’ll certainly be glued to a television, although I don’t have one – otherwise I’d never have time to do all I have to do here!”

Many of Lucy’s homegrown plants are for sale in



Above: reclaimed metal rings integrate with the retaining walls

the nursery beside the house. “All the plants I sell are propagated from those growing in the garden, so visitors can see what they are like when they mature.”

The garden and nursery are open every day. Entrance is free, although there is a voluntary collection box. “The proceeds go to support local youth work on the island,” she says. \*

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## Kitchen garden

ONE of the great things about growing your own veg is that it forces you to respect it more when you are cooking and eating it. People tend to be proud of their own produce, and as they gain confidence in the garden, they gain confidence in the kitchen.

They are bringing variety into their lives and challenging themselves to cook with what is in season. For example, cabbages are loved by gardening cooks more than non-gardening cooks, possibly because they know how they were grown and they chose which varieties to grow – they can taste the flavours.

That is not to say that it’s not hard work occasionally. With all the rain lately, the weeds are growing strong and healthy, and have to be kept down. Despite the rain, be careful to water regularly, as a light shower, rather than a deep soaking, will only encourage small surface roots, when what you want are deep earth-penetrating roots.

However small your garden, it is a good idea to build a compost heap. Some councils provide compost bins. If

not, you can improvise – disused pallets tied together make useful containers.

Some of your lettuces may have bolted, so pull these up and put them in your compost heap. Continue to pick those that have not, along with beans and peas. You can also lift main-crop potatoes, onions and carrots now. Minted broad beans with a little salted butter are the taste of summer.

You might also consider drying or freezing herbs you have grown – you can put them in bottles of oil to give specific flavours. Impress your friends by serving these flavoured oils with homemade bread to dip in as an appetiser.

Continue to sow cabbages and spinach, and plant out those you have hardened off. Protect cabbages from butterflies by covering them with a light protective fleece. In a couple of months, you will be steaming them lightly and serving them with lambs gigots, home-grown red onions and rosemary or mint sauce, and savouring the flavours.

Judith Dunlop grows cut flowers organically, which are for sale in Elie, north-east Fife  
(judithdunlop@hotmail.com)



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