



gardening

At the WATER'S EDGE



In a stunning but daunting setting, an inventive and indefatigable plantswoman has succeeded in creating a beautiful garden and flourishing nursery on her native Isle of Mull

WORDS BY STEPHANIE DONALDSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA JONES



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
A cloud of *Crambe cordifolia* by the gate to the chicken run; Lucy uses razor clam shells as plant labels; a decorative path; a pink-tipped hebe in flower.

THIS PICTURE The view across the potager to the Isle of Ulva



Golden eagles wheel overhead as Lucy Mackenzie leads the way through the small nursery and into her garden on the north-west coast of Mull. Despite such a magnificent distraction and the fabulous views over Loch Tuath to the Isle of Ulva, there is much at Lip na Cloiche to draw the eye away from the compelling surroundings. Lush and inventive planting, clever use of found objects and a terrain that in places would challenge the agility of a mountain goat, give this garden a personality as big as that of its setting – and its owner.

Lucy is a Muileach (a native of Mull), who returned to the island ten years ago after many years spent living in Rome with her Italian husband and their daughter. When he died, she decided it was time to come home. “Gardening in Italy may seem an easier option, but it wasn’t. The summers are so hot, constant watering is required and flowering seasons are very brief – a delphinium that blooms for up to five weeks here, will last barely a week there. I missed the green fields.”

When she found Lip na Cloiche (Edge of the Rock in Gaelic) it was no more than a ruined bothy backed by a steep hill of bracken and gorse. Beyond repair, the bothy had to be demolished, but this provided Lucy with a plentiful supply of stones to build walls and terraces in the garden. While her new, but traditional-style, house was being constructed, she holidayed on Mull, but lived mainly in Hampshire, where, in preparation for her homecoming, she worked in a nursery to gain invaluable practical experience and studied for a qualification in horticulture.

It must be her island blood and inherent resilience that allowed Lucy to see the potential of a site that would have terrified many, however breathtaking the views. In fact, the location is more benign than it may appear to an outsider; the sea loch and sheltering hills of Ulva beyond offer protection from the worst excesses of the North Atlantic and the presence of the Gulf Stream allows Lucy to grow an astonishing range of plants where bracken and gorse once held sway. There are many Mediterranean shrubs, as well as Chilean and New Zealand rarities, and these aren’t modest cosseted specimens but substantial thriving plants that are evidently as happy here as they would be in their native habitats. *Pittosporum tobira*, *Crinodendron hookerianum* and *Olearia traversii* have all reached the proportions of small trees.

The only flat area at Lip na Cloiche is occupied by the house and its immediate surroundings, which are tucked into the foot of the hill. The nursery is to the north, the front garden faces west, with borders of shrubs and herbaceous plants, including a huge cistus, and, on the most sheltered southern side, there’s a potager and a diminutive orchard, backed by a greenhouse where Lucy propagates plants for her nursery.

A wooden bridge, with a sinuous handrail made from a salvaged branch, leads from the nursery over a peaty burn to a path that follows the steep-sided banks planted with rheums, gunnera, candelabra primula and other moisture-loving ▷

THIS PAGE, TOP LEFT *Ceanothus cyaneus*. LEFT *Cerinthe major*. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The private nursery area with driftwood fence and columns; the greenhouse where Lucy propagates plants; meadow flowers flank the burn; *Rosa glauca*; preparing cuttings of *Ozothamnus rosmarinifolius*





"The plants I sell are grown here out of doors and are perfectly adapted to Mull's climate. Plants raised locally stand a much better chance of success"



plants. "I was able to extend the garden when my neighbour let me use this far bank of the burn," Lucy explains. It is at this point that the serious climbing begins and it becomes clear that the rope handrails are not purely decorative.

Rope is among the many materials that Lucy scavenges for use in the garden. A row of old cast-iron bedsteads embellishes the deer fencing on the upper boundary, driftwood edges beds and paths, and hidden among the planting are many artefacts that remain invisible during the summer months, waiting for winter to be unveiled. "I use a lot of reclaimed objects," she says. "I forage everywhere in winter – from the beach to farm tips. I'm always picking up things to use in the garden and not just decorative objects. I collect molehills for potting compost and after the local supplier of woodchip for boilers has finished chipping and carted his load away, I scrape the remnants off the road! Gardening here does require ingenuity and foresight – I have to think in advance about everything, I can't just pop down the road for another bag of soil improver."

While the planting on the lower slopes and flat areas of the garden is well-established, the higher reaches are still immature. This isn't because of any faint-heartedness on Lucy's part, but because she discovered that the original boundary fence had been erected ten metres below where it is now – presumably because less effort was required. Having corrected this fairly recently, she is happily scrambling about the vertiginous slopes digging holes and putting in more shrubs. In between the rocky outcrops, the soil is deep and fertile, although generous mulches are essential to prevent the young plants dying during dry spells.

From the highest point in the garden the views are stunning. Lip na Cloiche lies below like a small jewel-box, while beyond a velvety green meadow leads to the loch and Ulva, and the distant outline of the Treshnish Islands. Benches are strategically placed to watch the sun set over the islands. Since her return to Mull, the indefatigable Lucy has won a reputation as a fine plantswoman and her nursery is the first choice for islanders. "When they buy from the usual outlets," she says, "the plants often take one look at Mull and turn up their toes. Most of my sales are to local people. I attend all the farmers' markets and they have got to know that the plants I sell are grown here out of doors and are perfectly adapted to our climate. I do press the point about the importance of plants that have been grown locally."

It is hard to imagine that there is much passing trade on the remote single-track road that leads past Lip na Cloiche, but those who come this way may well be lured in by the hand-painted signs on weathered driftwood advertising Plants for Sale, B&B, Crafts, Cards, Eggs and Herbs. Those who succumb and spend some time with Lucy in her lovely garden, or stay overnight in her B&B, are sure to feel that her homecoming has been an entirely good thing.

Lucy Mackenzie, Lip na Cloiche, Ulva Ferry, Isle of Mull (01688 500257/07789 275713; www.lipnacloiche.co.uk)

TRIP TO MULL ARRANGED BY VISIT SCOTLAND ACCOMMODATION: WWW.GLENGORMCASTLE.CO.UK TRAIN TRAVEL: VIRGIN TRAINS: 0845 722 2333; WWW.VIRGIN.COM/ TRAINS. CAR HIRE: WWW.ARNOULDCLARKRENTAL.COM. FERRY: 0800 066 5000; WWW.CALMAC.CO.UK

TOP LEFT Tall delphinium spires. **TOP RIGHT** An old tin bath is used to display alpine and succulent plants. **ABOVE LEFT** Pebbles arranged diagonally bring pattern and texture to a stepped path. **LEFT** Cerise pink foxgloves tower over a selection of robust plants for sale at Lip na Cloiche



Lucy's pick of the plants

HEDGING

- *Griselinia* Underrated robust and attractive coastal hedging
- *Escallonia macrantha* (below left) Needs regular trimming to keep it in shape but bears masses of waxy red flowers much loved by bees
- *Olearia traversii* Very fast-growing, upright silvery foliage – makes a fine hedge.

SHRUBS

- *Buddleja loricata* (left) Clusters of creamy white flowers in summer
- *Teucrium fruticans* Attractive silver foliage, low tangly growth and blue flowers almost all year
- *Ozothamnus rosmarinifolius* (below) Lovely silver evergreen foliage, very wind hardy

For a good selection of tough coastal plants, try The Garden Cottage Nursery (01445 781777; www.gcnursery.co.uk)

