

Meconopsis in Two Gardens Part 2. Tricia Kohn.

The second part of the talk was given by Tricia who described the location, geology, topography and environmental conditions of the garden at Kerrachar as well as describing how the two of them developed the garden.

1) Location:

The garden is in the Parish of Assynt on the West coast of Sutherland, and approximately 30 miles south of Cape Wrath. 58 Degrees

15 minutes North, and 5 Degrees 6 minutes West.

Grid reference: 348179.

The garden is on the south shore of Loch a Chairn Bhain and about 600 yards from the open sea.

There is no road, or even path to Kerrachar. The nearest road is nearly a mile and a half away and visitor access was by sea.

2) Geology:

a) **The Rocks.** Most of Assynt is on Lewisian Gneiss (2700 - 2900 Million years old). This is a (mostly) very hard impermeable metamorphic rock. It has given rise to the characteristic landscape of Assynt ie. knockans and lochans. 1000 million years ago a hugely deep layer of sedimentary rock Torridonian Sandstone was deposited on top of the Gneiss. This was followed by a deposition of Cambrian Quartzite. During the ice ages most of these later rocks were eroded away, leaving isolated individual mountains of Torridonian Sandstone, sometimes capped with Quartzite, sitting on top of the Gneiss.

b) **Sea level changes.** During the ice ages the enormous weight of the ice pushed the underlying rocks downwards. Because of this, when the volume of the sea began to increase after the thaw, the level of the sea relative to the land was higher than it is today. The removal of the weight of the ice has allowed the land to 'recoil' and therefore over the last 15000 years the level of the sea relative to the land has fallen. The result of this is that the remains of the original post ice age beaches lie under the soil immediately above the current high tide line. This soil is therefore shallow and very well drained.

Topography

Loch a Chairn Bhain runs in a NW to SE direction. As the shore curves round more to the north near the outlet into the Minch, the glaciers have left us a small bay, running almost due north and south and facing inland down the loch. The

shingle beach is about 200 yds long and behind it is an area of flat land, about 3 acres in extent. The part of the land nearest the sea was previously occupied by the beach (see above), but after about 15yds a change in the type of soil indicates that a fresh water lochan had previously occupied what is now flat land.



The area is bounded by steeply sloping masses of Gneiss, particularly on the SW aspect where the land rises to a height of about 300ft. A small flattish area is also found to the south of the bay, which became the south garden, and was the first area to be cultivated.

Wind

The NW Highlands are recognised as the windiest place in Europe. Contending with the wind was one of our biggest problems, but really only from certain directions. The prevailing wind from the SW did not trouble us very much, although its gustiness did occasionally drop a ton of air on us from over the protecting hills. (We slept through the 2005 hurricane.) Our worst enemy was the SE gales that accompanied high pressure over Scandinavia as these whipped up salt spray and biggish waves, and could blow for days on end. Fortunately these were rare and really serious gales only occurred in the winter. Therefore deciduous trees and shrubs and most of the herbaceous perennials were unaffected. Evergreens were simply washed several times a day with fresh water a treatment which we found most effective.



Photo showing sea spray.

The soil

There are three different soil types at Kerrachar

a) The largest area is comprised of deep peaty soil. The chemical analysis of this

gave a pH of 4.6 and low levels of K and P. This contrasts strongly with high levels of S, B, Mn Cu, Zn and Co. (These may be deposited from sea spray or perhaps the use of seaweed as a fertiliser in the 19th and early 20th Centuries?) The organic matter content was 28%.

b) The area immediately above the beach is comprised of very shallow sandy soil overlying a subsoil containing large numbers of beach pebbles.

c) At the base of a steep gully draining the surrounding gneiss the soil was very different to a and b. It was much heavier and clay-like.

The work South Garden



a) **Strimming and brush-cutting.**

All the existing vegetation (mainly rushes, bracken, brambles, dockens and various coarse grasses) was cut down and moved.

b) **Drainage.** Three foot deep French drains at about 15 foot intervals were installed in the South Garden.

c) **Liming etc.** Crushed limestone, obtained from quarries at Ullapool, and rock phosphate (Glenphos) were applied to the whole area at about 5lb per sq. yd.

d) **Rotovation** The soil was mechanically rotovated to a depth of about 4 inches. This broke the crowns of the rushes and incorporated the limestone and rock phosphate.

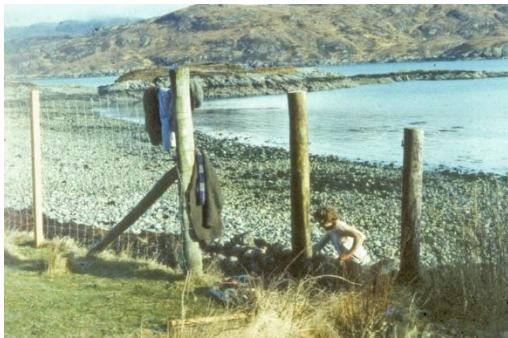


e) **Digging** The whole area was double dug by hand. The roots of the rushes etc were removed from each clod of topsoil lifted. The under layer of anaerobic soil was loosened. This operation took 3 months. (June to August 1995).

f) **Covering** As the soil was dug it was covered with black plastic which remained in place throughout the winter.



Windbreaks The exposed aspects of the garden were enclosed by windbreaks. These consisted of 8 foot larch posts at 6 foot intervals driven 2 feet into the soil and stabilised by buttresses. Between the posts three inch lathes of Douglas fir were attached at 2 inch intervals. Windbreak netting was then attached to the outside of the fence.



h) **Deer fence.** Both areas on each side of the house were fenced.

Planting

We planted 500 trees in the non-cultivated but enclosed areas: alder, willows, hazel, birch, Scot pine, oak, larch, rowan, Swedish whitebeam, The garden planting comprised mostly of herbaceous perennials, plus some shrubs. We eventually had 80 rose cultivars, including a hedge of *Rosa rugosa* along the top of the sea wall. We managed to grow *proteaceae* and to flower *Telopea* 'Burgundy' and *Protea subvestita*. By 2010 we had over 2000 species and cultivars of herbaceous perennials and shrubs. Our failures were mainly either too tender or from 'Continental' climates.

Photos of the Garden.



All photos Courtesy of Peter and Tricia Kohn.