

How a couple are restoring a Georgian gem complete with circular maze



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In the Garden

If you've flown into Dublin Airport recently and looked out of the window, you might have noticed a circular hedge maze halfway between Howth Head and the airport. This is the remarkable hidden garden at Belcamp Hutchinson House, located well off the Malahide Road and largely invisible – except maybe from the air.

The ivy-clad Georgian mansion was built in 1786 and takes its name from the original owner, Francis Hely-Hutchinson, Third Earl of Donoughmore. It has been occupied by more than 12 families, some interested in gardening, others not.

The latest owner is Karl Waldberg who, with his partner, Rhona Dunn, started rebuilding the garden about 15 years ago. Amazingly, they have been doing it with no professional help – an epic task given they also ran a B&B until recently.

It's not often that I visit gardens with such rich history. Along with a walled garden and the maze, one of the highlights is a full land-drainage system for the walled garden with a cistern in which accumulated water is retrievable by a plunger pump. Mazes make me think of *The Shining*, in which Jack Nicholson's character went somewhat crazy pursuing his victims through the hedges.

This one, I'm happy to report, is altogether more peaceful. Rhona chose escallonia to create the maze. 'When I selected escallonia, people told me I was mad as it is very brittle, but it grows very quickly and, as a result, I've seen the results in my lifetime,' she said.

Walking along the avenue with Rhona made me think about all the planning that went into it many moons ago. In those times, a garden was designed to produce the maximum efficiency for supplying the kitchen and, of course, to complement this, they added majestic trees like black walnuts, beeches, chestnut and evergreen oaks.

Karl said: 'The biggest challenge in the garden is cutting the hedges which I do over weeks. We took 600 cuttings from our escallonia hedge to create the maze, so that gives you an idea of how much work is involved over the year.'



AMAZING: The maze at Belcamp is walled by escallonia

Secret garden to lose yourself in



DEDICATION: The 1930 apple harvest, above, and Karl Waldberg and Rhona Dunn outside Belcamp Hutchinson House



The orchard, it's safe to say, would have been the soul of the garden for the last two centuries.

'It's my favourite part of the garden along with the maze and, in the past, they grew apples, peach plum, with four heated greenhouses for even more delicate planting,' Karl said.

And Rhona's favourite? 'Some parts of the garden are old and beautiful but it all adds up in the end to something special for me,' she said.

As we moved through the garden, I was greeted by pheasants, which give it a lovely, homely feel. They then

brought me to see what would have been the heart of the garden complete, with steam heating system.

Installed in 1880s by a previous owner, Major Doyle, the heating system predates the invention of the water pump.

Karl explained: 'It involved the coke-fuelled boiler heating water to steam, and channelling it around pipes throughout the growing houses, which of course ran back into the tank to be reused by force of gravity when cooled.'

'It was used during the winter to

protect the plants from frosts which in the 19th century were a lot more severe than we are used to nowadays.'

The pipes have long gone, but the reservoir remains and it struck me that one could consider restoring it in advance of oil running out and because of the current regeneration of fruit and vegetable gardening.

From the early 20th century, the garden was owned by George Hutchinson and later by the Blair Whites. During this time, the garden became famous for its flowers, fruit and vegetables, and employed 15 staff. I was most impressed by the fine house that the head gardener lived in at the time.

Karl has owned the estate since 1965 and had hoped to start regrowing apple trees commercially, but instead became the first commercial grower of mushrooms under poly tunnels in Ireland.

It was nearly a disaster, as the grant Karl needed was held up by red tape. However, Charlie Haughey was the local TD at the time and he managed to get the grant through. The mushroom growing was a success until the Seventies oil crisis.

As time moved on, Karl and Rhona planted lots of Irish yew and buxus, and the maze was planted by Rhona using escallonia cuttings.

The orchard now features loganberries, tayberrys, raspberries, pears, apples, cherry trees and figs. Growing successfully in the south-facing walled garden are kiwis,

which produced fruit last year. The walled garden phase coincided with the building of the new house in 1786. I also spotted a tamarix tree, which produces beautiful mauve flowers, and is well worth planting, even in a smaller setting.

The front of the house has an impressive rose display worked very nicely into the centre of the driveway. Pieris and pitosporums are planted to great effect.

As I moved around the garden, I came across an arbour covered by various varieties of roses. Nowadays, this would be referred to as an archway but that description does it no justice, as it is at least 20 metres long. Midsummer would seem an ideal time to return to see it in full bloom.

Rhona, however, finds the roses demanding. 'As much as I try not to use chemicals, I have no choice with the roses to combat the black spot,' she said. Some of the varieties Rhona selected are Dublin Bay, New Dawn and Wedding Day.

For a number of years, Belcamp was run as a guest house, so planting was concentrated in the walled area of the garden, with climbing roses such as the wonderfully named Rambling Rector (all are in their prime).

Rhona and Karl selected all plants with great care and even indulged themselves with a popular modern bamboo plant which, as they pointed out, needs lots of space.

The great thing about this garden is that even after 15 years working on its restoration, it offers so many options to develop.

This is a real labour of love for them. I felt I needed some advice before I left and Rhona's was good: 'The one thing we have discovered is: don't fight the terrain or soil, go with what suits the garden best and choose the plants on that basis.'

It's fair to say their work will go on for many years to come – and that one day, who knows, they may reopen the garden so the public can enjoy the fruits of their endeavour.

● Belcamp Hutchinson, Carr's Lane, Malahide Road, Balgriffin, Dublin 7

Don't forget... things to do this week

● Start feeding your fruit in the garden: strawberries and raspberries would greatly benefit from a potash-based feed, such as tomato food.

● Look for penstemons in the garden centres this weekend. They flower right through the summer in shades of red, purple and white. If you have them in the garden already, then cut them back hard now for best results.

● Wallflowers are back in fashion and this the time of the year to start sowing the seeds. Plant them in seed trays

indoors in the next few weeks for flowering next spring.

● Try crops in pots. For example, parsley and cabbage go very well together. So, if you have a sunny veranda, try this combination in terracotta pots with multipurpose compost.

● If bulbs, like daffodils and tulips, are finished flowering, let the leaves die back naturally, as this is when they gather their energy for next year's flowering. Old flower heads can be removed. Apply seaweed liquid feed for best results.