

## Irish National Stud Grounds Supervisor, Irene McMahon, answers your questions...



Grounds Supervisor, Irene McMahon has worked with the Irish National Stud since 1995 after qualifying from Kildalton Horticultural College. Attending University College, Cork, she graduated with a Diploma in Ecology (Distinction) and subsequently completed a course in Landscape Design from Blanchardstown Institute of Technology in 2008.

Her work at the Irish National Stud involves overseeing the maintenance of the gardens and designing new planting schemes. There are three main horticultural areas on the farm: the stud farm itself, the Japanese Gardens and St. Fiachra's Garden. "My favourite plants are perennials which can be used to create a strong and colourful impact during the main tourist season" says Irene.

### **Q. St. Fiachra's Garden appears to be a natural garden. How much work was there in establishing this style of garden?**

St. Fiachra's Garden was designed by Prof. Martin Hallinan in 1999 on four acres of marshy ground and took almost a year to complete. The existing landscape was molded and shaped to make the garden look as natural as possible and strongly coloured planting schemes were avoided in favour of a more relaxed woodland and wetland theme. This style of planting has resulted in a garden that has a contemplative and peaceful ambience and reflects St. Fiachra's love of nature and the soil. It was really exciting at the time to watch the landscape being transformed into the garden that we have today. Creating a garden like this with a natural effortless feel takes, in my opinion, quite a lot of skill and restraint. The waterfall is completely man-made using limestone rocks taken from reclaimed land in Galway and yet it feels like it's been there forever! St. Fiachra's Garden and the Japanese Gardens are polar opposites and complement each other beautifully.

### **Q. Do you have to replace plants in the Japanese Gardens and from where do you source them?**

While many of the original plants still remain in the Japanese Gardens it is important to replace any that are coming to the end of their life. We are currently trying to source a replacement for one of our oldest bonsais, a *Chamaecyparis obtusa*, which is estimated to be over 200 years old. We source our plants by scouring the local nurseries on a continuous basis for suitable bonsai material. We then add them to our stock of young plants that are being trained in the Japanese style. Although the garden is steeped in history it is vital that we keep an eye to the future with an ongoing plant training programme. We recently celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Japanese Gardens but a garden is not frozen in time. We must take the necessary steps now to ensure the garden looks just as well when we celebrate its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

### **Q. How does the volume of visitors impact on the garden ecology?**

While we do have over 100,000 tourists visiting us each year the grounds are sufficiently large to accommodate such a high number without causing any great disturbance to the animals and plants. The most secretive residents we have are probably our kingfishers. We catch glimpses of them occasionally and I know they nest here successfully each year so that is a good indication that their habitat is relatively undisturbed. We also have the privilege of being able to watch herons fishing on

our lakes but they tend to be most active in the early morning when there are not as many people about.

**Q. The Stud and Japanese Gardens are quite manicured. Does this limit the scope to which you can attract wildlife?**

The gardens play host to a number of wildlife species and I am very keen to promote this aspect of gardening. We have two small areas on the farm which have been dedicated to wildflower species and when replacing or planting new hedges we always favour native species like whitethorn, hazel, holly, oak and ash. These plants help to create excellent habitat for indigenous birds and mammals. My ecology studies gave me an insight into the important role that gardens play in the nurturing of our native wildlife species. Wildlife habitats are being destroyed on a daily basis and I feel that all gardens no matter how small can play a part in conserving many of our native species.

**Q. What particular wildlife projects have you been involved with?**

We erected ten bird boxes and twelve bat boxes in St. Fiachra's garden in 2005, all of which are occupied annually. My hope for the future is that we can set up a camera within one of the boxes and have a screen set up for the public which will show a bird family hatching and fledging.

In 2009 the Irish National Stud became part of the National Phenology Network coordinated by Trinity College Dublin. As part of this initiative I planted two birch and two ash plants on the farm and each year I observe and record the growing phases of these trees. This information is pooled with the data collected from other participating gardens around the country and the results will determine how plants are responding to changing climatic conditions.

**Q. How organic is the gardening at the Irish National Stud?**

I never use any chemical pesticides on the gardens. Chemicals tend to upset the natural balance in the garden between prey and the predators. Gardening organically means that some of the plants do suffer a little but it's not worth declaring chemical warfare on the garden because of the occasional bite from a hungry slug! Beer traps are an excellent alternative to slug pellets and an extremely effective way of keeping the population under control. Unfortunately, because of the large size of the farm it is necessary for us to use herbicides and fungicides to control the weeds and moss but we try to minimize their use as much as possible. We are trying to use only "peat free" compost as plants and animals that are unique to bogs are being threatened with extinction due to peat harvesting.

**Q. Did you have to do a lot of preparation for the recent State Visit of Queen Elizabeth II?**

It was a wonderful opportunity for all of the grounds staff to be part of such a high profile and historic visit. As you can imagine all hands were on deck in the weeks coming up to the visit and all of the staff worked extraordinarily hard and played their part in ensuring that the grounds looked immaculate on the big day!