



Burren garden on the wild side

Esther-Mary and Gordon D'Arcy in their wonderfully wild garden in Ballinderreen, Kinvara, Co Galway. **Photograph:** Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar

Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar continues her series on wildlife gardens with a visit to an unusually natural and beautiful wildlife garden kept by Gordon and Esther-Mary D'Arcy in Ballinderreen, Co Galway.



After several years of writing articles giving gardening advice to readers of *Wings*, I've decided to get away from the laptop and visit some gardens to see what people are doing in their plots. I am visiting a selection of urban, suburban and rural gardens and looking to find interesting adaptations for wildlife.

A truly wild garden

I recently had the pleasure of visiting the garden of Gordon D'Arcy and his wife Esther-Mary. They are a very friendly and interesting couple. Gordon is a well-known environmentalist and illustrator. He holds a Master's degree in environmental science from Trinity College Dublin and works as a freelance environmental artist, author and educator. Esther-Mary is a physiotherapy advisor at the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists.

They've been living in their house in Ballinderreen, between Kilcolgan and Kinvara, in south Co Galway, for 30 years now, and even though I considered myself to be an advocate of 'wild and natural' gardening, they take it to a whole new level!

The garden is unusual in that it is surrounded by fen and land that seasonally floods. It used to be wetter but it now dries out completely in summer. A fen is a type of wetland where the water is limy or alkaline, so it is different and rarer than our more familiar acidic bog. The vegetation in summer is tall and lush with willows growing around the edges. The D'Arcys' garden, located beside the fen, is on a small rise and is less than an acre of stony, 'burreny' ground.

Gordon and Esther-Mary have planted lots of trees over the years and now have many mature specimens – they have twenty different **native tree species** growing on-site!

They have no lawn and no lawn mower: they just have mossy ground under mature

trees, and open glades with a natural succession of spring violets and celandines followed by grasses, docks and horsetails. These give way to brambles and bindweed in summer.

Needless to say, the garden is very low-maintenance and blends seamlessly with the surrounding wilderness or Burren landscape. They have paved patio areas and seating with views out over the fen.

Garden ponds

There are two ponds in their garden and both were once wells. They cleaned the one located out front first: it had been used as a dump and had fridges, concrete blocks and a washing machine left in it. It was tough work cleaning it out, but now it's a lovely stone well.

Water levels were low when I visited, but they tell me it does hold water all year round now – and on top of that, it has **Smooth News!**

The other pond has a similar history, but it was only recently cleared and still looks a little 'new,' as ponds do for a year or two after works are completed on them – but **Common Frogs** have moved back in already!

In terms of wildlife on the site, they have seen foxes, Stoats, otters and badgers as well as Bank Voles, House Mice, Field Mice and rats. The rats were mostly in the compost heap, so they switched over to a wormery; that has worked out really well, with fewer rats now.



Smooth Newt. **Photo:** Andrew Kelly



The D'Arcys served tea in front of the wild, unspoilt fen behind the garden.



Grasshopper Warbler: it has been seen in the garden. **Photo:** Rónán McLaughlin

They used to have **pipistrelle bats** in the roof of the house in summer; but work had to be done on the roof and, once that was finished, sadly the bats didn't return.

Three different pipistrelle species are found in Ireland and all are legally protected – their roosts cannot be disturbed. Works must be carried out when the bats are elsewhere, and in this case this meant in the winter as it was a summer roost.

If you have bats and need to do repairs on your house or roof, please contact the **Bats Conservation Ireland** for information and advice on how to do it appropriately.

Birds in the garden

Bird-wise, the D'Arcys are very lucky – I couldn't keep up with the list of species they have seen in their garden! This is due to the diversity of habitat on their land – wet and dry land side by side, a stream with **Kingfishers**, and mature trees and open

farmland all round them.

They have seen **Grasshopper Warblers**, **Sedge Warblers**, **Grey Wagtails**, **Hen Harriers** and even **Long-eared Owls**, as well as the usual garden suspects such as **Blue Tits**, **Great Tits**, **Coal Tits**, various **finches**, **Dunnocks** and **Wrens**, and even have **Stock Doves** nesting in a ruined mill by the stream.

They don't have any bird boxes up, but then there is no shortage of natural habitat and nesting opportunities on-site, so they don't really need to. They have mature trees and dense shrubbery, stone walls, a ruined mill with a roof, and the fen itself.

The D'Arcys don't feed the birds either; as Gordon feels they should be able to find food for themselves. The garden is managed in such a way as to produce plenty of natural bird food, which is surely better than having a garden devoid of habitat and then putting up nest boxes and food tables – although Gordon did admit he has succumbed in hard

winter weather and put some food out.

I loved their garden space, and it's great to know there are people out there who are even wilder in their gardening habits than I am! I was perhaps most impressed, though, by their move to only one vehicle, for environmental reasons, which, for rural Ireland, is quite difficult. They cycle lots, too, and Esther-Mary uses the bus to get to work in Dublin; they share the motor vehicle for all other journeys. Hats off!

➡ **Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar** is an outreach horticulturist based in Co Galway who is involved in school and community gardening, teaching adults and transition-year students and helping Tidy Towns groups. She also works in Portumna Castle Gardens. She can be contacted at lynnsirishgardens@gmail.com or you can send her a tweet at [@OkееffeLynn](https://twitter.com/OkееffeLynn). Lynn runs a website at lynnsirishgardens.wixsite.com/kinvara.



Stock Dove: nesting in a ruined mill. **Photo:** John Fox



View of woodland from the patio in the D'Arcys' garden. **Photo:** Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar