

BLOOMING WONDERFUL

A €7million investment has seen the surroundings of the Mount Congreve estate in Waterford turned into a wonderland for gardening and historical enthusiasts alike

REPORT: MICHELLE JACKSON

With spring in full swing, our thoughts are turning to the garden and the extra stretch in the evenings helps us to imagine balmy

days sitting among the blooms of summer. We are blessed in Ireland to have a host of gorgeous gardens to visit and our climate lends itself to perfect planting conditions that many varieties and species of flowers and shrubs adore.

In Waterford, a magical place has opened its gates once again to the public after the estate and grounds have undergone a major refurbishment. Mount Congreve is a short 15-minute drive from Waterford City, which in recent years has seen a historic renaissance. Several magnificent museums, including the Irish Silver Museum, The Museum of Time and others, display extraordinary medieval artefacts in a

quarter of the city that is now known as The Waterford Treasures.

Mount Congreve has been lauded as a 'great garden of the world' and the title is certainly fitting to an incredible 70 acres of woodland gardens and four acres of walled gardens within this 140-acre estate. The grounds were inspired by Lionel de Rothschild's exceptional garden at Exbury in Hampshire and work began on Mount Congreve Gardens in the 1950s. Ambrose Congreve's achievements were acknowledged by Queen Elizabeth, who awarded him a CBE, and by Trinity College Dublin, which granted him an honorary doctorate.

The house and grounds at Mount Congreve serve as a crown and garland to make this corner of the country the perfect holiday destination and gateway to explore Ireland's Ancient East.

Amber Congreve was the seventh generation of Congreves to reside at the estate and he attributed his longevity to his passion for gardening. Indeed it was as he set off for the →



THE GARDENS AT MOUNT CONGREVE HAVE BEEN COVERED IN A WONDERFUL MAKEOVER



Chelsea Flower Show in 2011 at the grand age of 104 that he put his hoe down for the last time. However, he entrusted the estate to the people of Ireland in his will and in doing so has brought about a horticultural renaissance on the banks of the River Suir.

His generosity will come to fruition this spring as a group of horticultural students will join the estate to take a year-long programme of study that will see new life course through the woodland and gardens. The Victorian Glasshouse will be brought back to its full splendour within the parameters of the walled gardens. When Ambrose presided over the estate, the fruits from these heated houses included pineapples and fresh flowers.

He believed that music stirred the fruits and flowers to grow healthier so jazz and classical music was piped via speakers into the glasshouse. The fact that the wires connected to the speakers were mysteriously cut on a couple of occasions suggests that these genres of music may not have been to the taste of some of the ground staff. This and other stories are told in an interactive display at the entrance to the walled garden.

Dotted along the winding pathways are points of interest including seating, a pagoda and the memorial where the ashes of Ambrose are buried. The Greek-inspired temple was built in England from Bath stone, under the supervision of master craftsman Joe Clarke. It is purported that Ambrose said on occasion that he was looking forward to going to his final resting place under the magnolias with a fine view of the river below. This temple is where his wife Marjorie is also laid to rest

and there is a tremendous sense of peace and harmony in this sweet spot.

Although the gardens have long been a treasure enjoyed by many visitors, the house is now, after €7 million worth of investment, a delight and wonderful venue for functions and events.

'THERE IS A TREMENDOUS SENSE OF PEACE AND HARMONY IN THIS SWEET SPOT'





The Stable café and shop is filled with fine crafts and gifts to inspire anyone with an appreciation of the garden or the kitchen. Cookbooks and handmade soaps are piled next to candles, scarves and watering cans. Breakfast and lunch will be served daily and inside the house a lovely treat of afternoon tea is going to be very popular for visitors, with vegetarian and gluten-free options available.

The fact that so many local people have passionately thrown themselves into the project of bringing the estate back to life is evident in every corner of this stunning Georgian building.

At the celebratory dinner in March after the grand launch, I spoke to chairman Des Whelan, who has given much energy to the project. He grew up a few fields away from the estate and, now director of WLR and other radio stations in the south of the country, he shared with me the huge effort and commitments of so many locals

who worked tirelessly, even when funds were running dry.

The joint efforts of many individuals, especially estate manager Ray Sinnott and garden curator Michael White, whose names came up in the speeches frequently, show just what can be achieved when a community works together.

Diarmuid Gavin was present at the event and he spoke affectionately about the gardens. He told a tale about how he inadvertently was informed by a German chap that a particular type of magnolia could be found in the estate that was named Diarmuid Gavin, much to his own surprise. In his speech he said that he had taken a tour to check it out.

After dinner a performance artist, on stilts and dressed in sparkling fairy lights resembling an ethereal dragonfly, beckoned at guests to follow her into the Chinese Drawing Room, where dessert and cocktails were served. The Chinese wallpaper

is unique and was painted by hand originally and found in the port of Canton in the 1790s. Indeed it is so unique that a group of wallpaper enthusiasts have arranged a visit to the house this year.

Crowds of up to 86,000 are expected to descend upon the estate this summer and it is hoped to see that grow to 120,000 by 2032. It is up to visitors to make this beautiful garden estate a success and with such enthusiasm surrounding this highlight on the Waterford Greenway it has already made its mark as a bucket list destination – not just for gardeners.

The family motto certainly reflects the great work and legacy left by Ambrose at this remarkable estate: 'He does not die whose good name lives on.'



Mount Congreve Gardens are open seven days a week until 30 September. For more, see mountcongreve.com





CLOCKWISE FROM MAIN: AN AERIAL VIEW OF THE ESTATE; STUNNING FOLIAGE; AMBROSE CONGREVE; AND THE STABLE CAFE

