

€7m historic gardens spring back into life

Visitors flock to see breathtaking magnolia display in Co. Waterford

By Colm McGuirk

SPRING has truly sprung at one of Ireland's best-known gardens. And visitors are flocking to the newly reopened Mount Congreve Gardens in Co. Waterford to enjoy a raft of upgraded facilities and its 'stunning' springtime magnolia display.

And despite some 'shocking' weather in recent weeks, commercial director Sara Dolan said the gardens still 'exceeded [visitor number] targets for March'.

'The support locally has just been huge,' she told the Irish Mail on Sunday. 'It's very overwhelming.'

The historic gardens – which contain one of the largest collections of plants in Ireland – were officially reopened at the beginning of March after a €7m renovation programme.

Upgrades include a brand new café, gift shop and eco-playground, as well as renovations to its 18th century house, which allow visitors to see inside for the first time.

Ms Dolan believes around now is the best time of year to visit as plants come into bloom, including the gardens' famed array of magnolia trees which blossom for just a few weeks in March and April.

She calls the spectacle 'a feast for the eyes', adding: 'It's a sea of mag-

nolia. The pinks gently blowing in the wind against the blue skies – it's just absolutely stunning.'

The gardens – built and maintained as the passion project of the 7th generation Ambrose Christian Congreve, who died in 2011 aged 104 – went down a storm at last week's Fáilte Ireland Meitheal tourism trade show, and Ms Dolan believes they will become a popular destination on international tour itineraries.

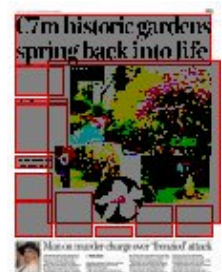
'We met buyers and agents from the four corners of the world who are all very interested in bringing international groups here,' she said.

'The south east would not be the typical tourist trail and so it's turning that ship to a degree.'

Ms Dolan said enthusiasts 'who we affectionately call the garden geeks... go a little crazy' when they visit the gardens of Mount Congreve.

'They know the type of species that we have here that you would not see anywhere. We have one of the rarest trees that exists – the dinosaur tree. And even if you're not into gardening, it's just a really beautiful space to enjoy.'

Other attractions on the now

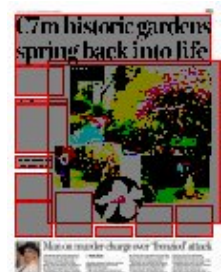


State-owned grounds include a Georgian glasshouse, a Chinese pagoda, a temple where Mr Congreve and his wife are interred and a summer house where they used to have afternoon tea during summer months. The Waterford Greenway also passes through Mount Congreve, with cyclists regularly using the juice stand on the grounds as a rest stop.

A school of horticulture within the grounds will run its first course from the middle of this month – a 48-week programme that will result in a level five qualification in horticulture and see students maintain parts of the gardens.

‘We’re very excited about this because there’s such knowledge and history in the gardens that we need to preserve and protect, and one of the ways that we want to do that is through education,’ Ms Dolan said. ‘There will obviously be tutors and lecturers, but we’ll also use the expertise within our own team to educate students on the practicalities of maintaining a garden of 16 kilometres.’

‘The pinks blowing in the wind against the sky’





FULL PETAL JACKET:
A visitor takes pictures of the Spring beauty of the rejuvenated gardens

