

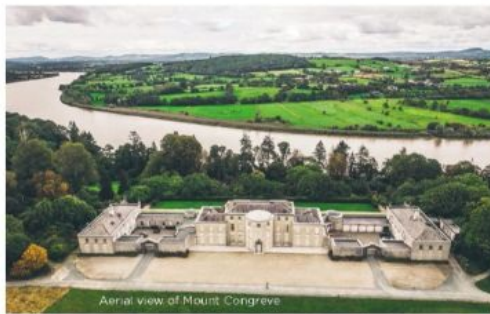
GARDENS

A Gift of a Garden

This is the first April that visitors can explore the Mount Congreve Gardens and experience a fabulous profusion of azaleas, camellias, magnolias and rhododendrons



The Bell Gate entrance to the walled garden



Aerial view of Mount Congreve

During spring and early summer, the gardens at Mount Congreve are a joy, a pleasure heretofore denied to all but private guests of the late banker, industrialist and garden enthusiast, Ambrose Congreve who inherited his Irish Georgian family seat near Kilmacidan, Co Waterford, in 1963. Here, he established gardens of world renown, noted especially for their magnificent displays of flowering woodland plants. He died at the age of 104 while attending the 2011 Chelsea Flower Show.

Congreve was the last of seven generations of the family, six of whom lived at Mount Congreve. In 1955, he began to make large clearings in the woodlands to create the necessary conditions where his new plants would thrive. He searched for rare and exotic specimens far and wide on his travels for business, sparing no effort or cost in pursuit of his passion. With the inspiration, generosity and encouragement of Lionel Nathan de Rothschild (arguably the greatest landscaper of the 20th century and one of the cleverest hybridists) whose garden at Exbury he admired, Congreve began the process that would lead to Mount Congreve's recognition as one of the Great Gardens of the World, and to recognition by Queen Elizabeth.

Thanks to his generosity in placing the Mount Congreve estate in trust for the people of Ireland, the gardens – and a pretty new café and shop – were opened to the public last winter. This month, a planting of over a hundred scented Rhododendron Lady Alice Fitzwilliam are in flower and the woodland garden walk awaits, with more than 50 varieties of Pieris, their foliage in many shades from salmon-pink to fire-red. Framed by hundreds of magnolias, The Herman Dool Magnolia Walk (named for the influential onetime head gardener), overlooks a magnificent view of the River Suir and features stunning specimens, many of which are Mount Congreve selections raised from seed in the 1960s. Up to the very last years of his life, Mr Congreve could be found in the garden dispensing orders and advice relating to his beloved plants.

The collection is still expanding steadily under the encyclopaedic knowledge of Garden Curator Michael White (AJ Waley Medal from the Royal Horticultural Society of Great Britain) with new additions and its own programme of breeding to create new hybrids of rhododendrons and magnolias among others. The gardens, comprising about 70 acres of woodland, a four-acre walled garden (which supplies both fruit and veg to the café and plants for the gift shop) and fabulous walks and trails to suit all ages and fitness levels, are spectacular. The original Georgian glasshouse is being restored and there are wonderful lawns and even a Pagoda folly. As visitors enter through the house, they may catch a glimpse of the very beautiful Chinese Room which features 18th-century wallpaper, painted by hand.

The redevelopment by Falte Ireland and Waterford City and County Council has resulted in a rewarding visitor experience: the pretty Stables Café offers delicious coffee and cake, brunches and lunches and there are special events and garden tours throughout each season. ■

www.mountcongreve.com.



UP TO THE VERY LAST YEARS OF HIS LIFE, MR CONGREVE COULD BE FOUND IN THE GARDEN DISPENSING ADVICE RELATING TO HIS BELOVED PLANTS.



A classical temple with a view of the River Suir is the final resting place of Ambrose Congreve. BELOW, and his wife Marjorie, who pre-deceased him.



The Stables Café



The Secret Garden gift shop.