

The Waterford Greenway stop at Mount Congreve gardens. Picture: Karen Dempsey Photography

# Paths to paradise

**“When one plants anything, whether it involves five or fifty plants, they should be planted together and not dotted here and there.”**

**T**HOSE words, of Ambrose Congreve (1907-2011), describe one of the great gardens of the world.

They conjure up the essence of the wonderful Mount Congreve in Co Waterford.

So many adjectives could be used to describe these gardens, such as majestic, magnificent, superb, breathtaking, fabulous, and more. Whichever you choose or none, these gardens are filled with history and heritage.

Mount Congreve House was home to six generations of Congreves and was built in the 1760s by the celebrated architect John Roberts and remodelled in the 1960s.

I first visited with my mother when I was about 10 and to this day I can feel the wonder of that first trip — I knew even then that I had just seen some-

## **Peter Dowdall retraces the steps he took as a child as he visits Mount Congreve in Co Waterford**

thing special and experienced a place, hidden from the rest of the world, a refuge on the grandest of scales. It was in Mount Congreve that I began to understand planting schemes and designs and how to use plants as art.

Inspired by Lionel de Rothschild’s exceptional garden at Exbury in Hampshire, England, work began on Mount Congreve Gardens in the 1950s. Ambrose Congreve’s achievements were acknowledged by Queen Eliza-

beth and by Trinity College Dublin, which granted him an honorary doctorate. Up to the very last years of his life, Mr Congreve could be found in the gardens dispensing orders and advice relating to his beloved plants. He attributed his longevity to having a garden to care for.

You could, and still can, see Ambrose Congreve’s influence throughout — if one rhododendron would do, then 100 would be nicer. He understood the scale of what he was working with. Where a normal-sized garden might use five of one type of rhododendron, here there may be 105.

Since that first visit in the mid-80s, I have returned many times, I had the privilege of meeting the late Ambrose Congreve several times before he died, of a heart attack on his way to the RIIS Chelsea Flower Show in 2011 aged 104.

The only way to understand these gardens is to be in them, to experience the energy, the aura of the place, the feeling that it will give you. Perhaps

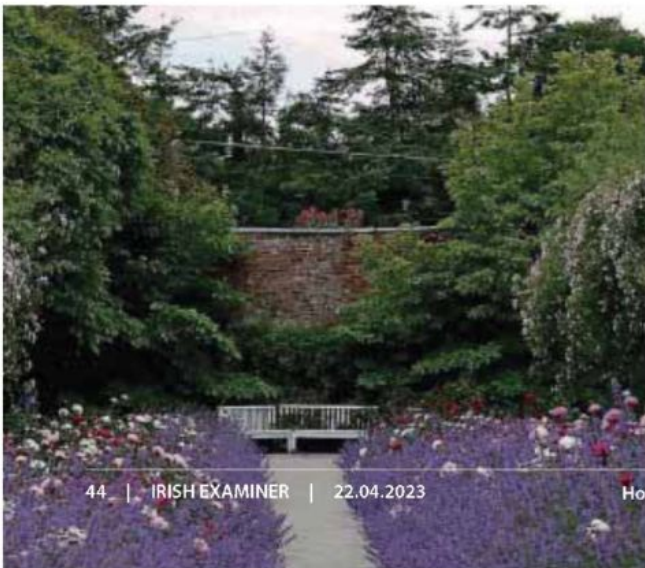
you will understand if I tell you that Ambrose and his wife lie in a crypt under the temple in the gardens, looking out forever over the gardens and the surrounding countryside, so attached were they to this place.

Mount Congreve Gardens represent gardening on a very grand scale and they are one of the wonders of the floral world. The garden collection is a haven of scent and colour spread over 70 acres, with 16km of stunning walking trails meandering through the sublime woodland with scenic and peaceful places to sit and relax along the way offering a wonderful escape to nature.

The walkways can be experienced by gardening aficionados, families and those, simply seeking tranquillity. These walkways are lined with magnolias, banks of rhododendrons and azaleas and in one area, a huge rockery with architectural features



A couple surveying the walled gardens.  
Below: The Peony Walk at Mount Congreve Gardens.



throughout. Along with the walled garden which has been in continual use for over 250 years, glorious herbaceous beds, and sweeping lawns, Mount Congreve is one of Ireland's greatest gems waiting to be uncovered.

The spectacularly designed gardens feature plants from every continent, consisting of over 3,000 trees and shrubs, over 2,000 rhododendrons, 600 camellias, 300 acer cultivars, 600 conifers, 250 climbers, and 1,500 herbaceous plants. It also includes a four-acre walled garden filled with scent, colour and water features.

**I** OFTEN wondered what would happen to this magical place once Ambrose Congreve passed on. I knew it was to be left to the people of Ireland but such a "gift" can often be too costly to maintain. It was the private money that was constantly being put into it that kept it at the standard that it had.

Perhaps it is timely that the world has never been more aware of the importance of gardens and the natural world and the role such places have to play in helping with modern-day challenges. I'm delighted to report that the work started by Mr Congreve continues and the estate recently underwent a redevelopment with an investment of over €6m from the Rural Regeneration Fund, Fáilte Ireland and Waterford City and County Council, the result is a world-class visitor experience which was finally unveiled on March 1, 2023.

As part of the newly redeveloped offering, a series of new trails has been outlined within the beautiful gardens

Peter Dowdall first visited Mount Congreve at the age of about 10 and he still regards it as the ultimate child's paradise.

with new pathways and orientation. Visitors have a choice of three self-guided trails, The Woodland Walk is about 55 minutes in duration and visitors can walk a trail lined with spectacular collections of camellias, magnolias and rhododendrons.

On the fully accessible 20-minute Fragrant Walk Trail visitors can encounter year-round, ever-changing fragrances as they journey through varied plant collections and glimpse the woodland garden to the west and the walled garden to the east. And on the 30-minute Walled Garden Walk, you can explore how herbs, vegetables, and fruit trees are grown as you easily stroll through the kitchen garden.

Expertly led guided tours are also on offer every Thursday at 2pm with one of the Mount Congreve gardeners. This two-hour tour is a delight for gardening and heritage enthusiasts as the guides share their passion for gardening, first-hand secrets and world-class innovative techniques and knowledge that has been passed down through generations.

The gardens are home to one of the largest collections of plants in Ireland and it boasts one of the largest collections of rhododendrons in the world. There are not too many places where you will see this type of garden, intensely planted and strongly designed. So much thought has been



Mount Congreve Estate.  
Picture: Colin Shanahan

given to where plants were positioned and where paths should travel to (everything was considered) from the lie of the land to the surrounding countryside. One pathway, which is flanked by magnolia soulangeana, seems to travel into the middle distance and into the River Suir beyond.

**O**THER new elements in the garden include a sensory experience; Ambrose Congreve loved music almost as much as his garden — when he was working in the greenhouse he would play his favourite jazz as he believed good music helped his flowers to grow better and who am I to disagree? In fact, the entire walled gardens were piped for music with speakers to be found in each corner. Big-band and Glen Miller would have the greenhouse rocking. Today, this wonderful experience is revived.

In addition, a brand-new eco-playground is set out for installation for young visitors to Mount Congreve Gardens, as Monty's Lawn will be home to tree-top slides and branch swings plus there is a new discovery table for little ones to enjoy learning about nature and our ecosystem.

The new offering is also setting out some space for four-legged friends, as a new 2km wetland walkway offers dog owners a chance to enjoy a walk with their beloved pooches.

The kitchen gardens have also been lovingly and brought back to full production with the gardens planted seasonally to stock as much as possible for the brand-new Stables Café menu. From vegetables to salads and fruits the gardens are foraged year-round by the kitchen team where the distance from plot to plate is all but a few steps.

Many of the garden's architectural features have been lovingly restored including the gentle waterfall, the Chinese pagoda and the stonemason who originally created 'The Temple' — the final resting place of Ambrose Congreve.

His wife Marjorie has carried out a full restoration of the classically designed structure.

Mount Congreve House had never opened to tourists in its history but works have been carried out to have phase one of the mansion restored and opened to the public.

Visitors arrive in the elaborate pillared foyer to the visitor information and ticketing desk, from here they can see a glimpse of the restored Mount Congreve library, Marjorie's Afternoon Tea Room, the incredible Chinese Room adorned with hand-designed wallpaper from the 1790s, which



is the only one of its kind in the world, and they will also get to see a brand-new Congreve family exhibition along with a gigantic 3D model of the exquisite 70-acre gardens.

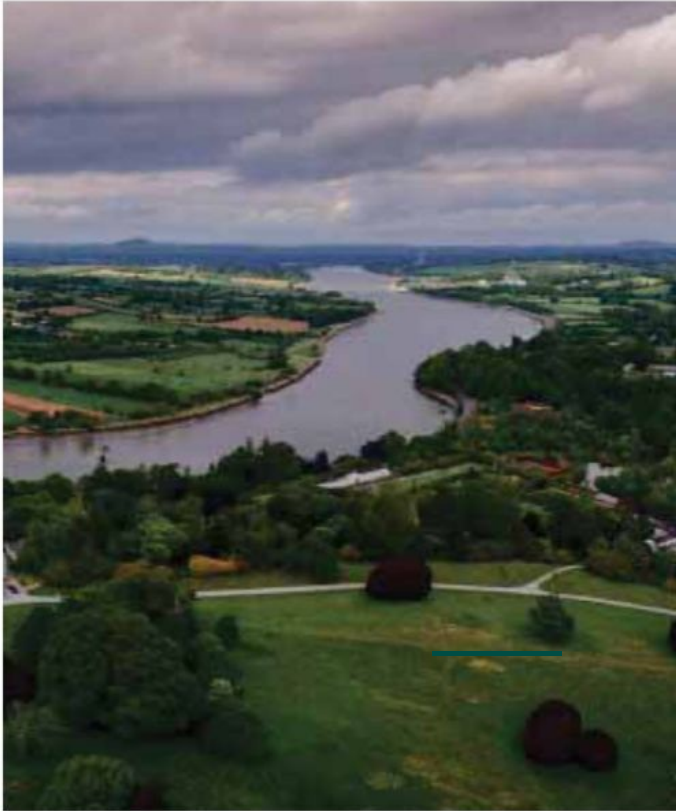
To complement the 18th-century mansion house, a purpose-built visitor centre has been created in the existing courtyard and former stables in the eastern wing. The glass-roofed courtyard with its original architectural features retained is now home to a serene new visitor centre and cafe, which overlooks the magnolia treetops.

The plot-to-plate menu at the Stables Café features an abundance of local produce along with flavours and vegetables fresh from the Mount Congreve kitchen gardens and is open for breakfast, lunch and a special Mount Congreve signature afternoon tea which is served in the old tack room.

The visitor centre and secret garden shop host an array of award-winning Irish arts and crafts along with a broad selection of artisanal food and drinks and even some Mount Congreve garden woodland gin, Mount

Congreve garden-signature scented soaps and more.

In the western wing of Mount Congreve House you'll find a development which the garden team believe Ambrose Congreve would have loved. Mount Congreve Gardens has joined forces with Waterford Wexford Education and Training Board to offer 16 students a Masters QQI Level 5 training course in a school of horticulture based at Mount Congreve Gardens and led by the award-winning garden designer Gerard Mullen.



Left: There's plenty for children at the gardens, including a new 'discovery' table for little ones to enjoy learning about nature and ecosystems.  
 Above: Wisteria in the walled garden at Mount Congreve.

Another first for Mount Congreve Gardens is the arrival of its very first self-catering accommodation guests. Works have been ongoing at the garden gate lodge which has been tastefully restored and has a two-bedroom haven in the midst of the countryside.

A stay at the Mount Congreve gate lodge offers guests "the keys to the gardens" where they can explore, relax and enjoy the entire estate all to themselves after hours.

The detached five-bay single-storey

gate lodge built in 1775, still has some original features and the newly renovated additions have a tranquil homely environment. The gate lodge will be available for bookings from mid-April. Plans for the renovation of more estate cottages and apartments are planned. The gardens are open year-round seven days a week (four days a week in low season). Full details can be found and tickets can be booked at [www.mountcongreve.com](http://www.mountcongreve.com).

The gardens also have direct access to the 45km Waterford Greenway.