Gardens on the Wild Atlantic Way

Travel writer Yvonne Gordon takes a tour of the best gardens along the coastal counties of the Wild Atlantic Way

With dramatic sea cliffs and rocky headlands, unspoilt beaches and coves, and long remote peninsulas, all shaped and sculpted by the power of the Atlantic Ocean, the 2,500km Wild Atlantic Way is one of the world’s most amazing coastal routes. Running from Kinsale in Co. Cork right up to the Inishowen Peninsula in Donegal, the route has some of Ireland’s most dramatic scenery, so it might seem difficult to imagine how delicate flowers and exotic plants thrive in exposed conditions and salty sea air.

However, the entire Atlantic coastal route is awash with some of Ireland’s most magnificent gardens. Whether they are set in the micro-climates of West Cork and kept warm by the Gulf Stream, tucked into a corner of the peat boglands of Connemara in Galway or sitting proudly on the edge of the Atlantic on a remote peninsula in Co. Kerry or Donegal, we bring you the best gardens to visit this summer along Ireland’s stunning Wild Atlantic Way.

We start our journey at Fernhill House in Clonakilty, West Cork. This country house hotel is more than 200 years old and was once the area’s most luxurious Georgian mansion. Walk through the wisteria entrance to the gardens and you can enjoy exploring the Jurassic Garden, stroll down the cherry blossom, rose and bamboo walks or see the permaculture forest, which has 1,400 young trees. Fernhill is one of the 25 gardens on the West Cork Garden Trail. This also includes the beautiful gardens at Garnish Island in Glengarriff Harbour, reached by a short ferry crossing. The Gulf Stream combined with the shelter of the bay means that many exotic species flourish in the gardens, which have an Italian section, a Grecian temple and a Martello tower. Also enjoying its own micro-climate is Kells Bay in Co. Kerry, set right on the Ring of Kerry. There are six gardens including a walled garden, primeval forest, river ramble, bamboo glade and a cliff walk, and the gardens’ more sheltered areas are home to several exotic species of ferns, palms and Chilean myrtle.

The picturesque surrounds of Kylemore Abbey in Connemara, Co. Galway, are one of the most beautiful settings for a garden and the Victorian Walled Gardens here dates from the 1800s.
The gardens are set over six acres with a formal flower garden, vegetable garden and rockery. Also in Galway, inland from the coast but worth a detour is Ardcarraig. It too extends over six acres and is divided into Japanese sections plus a formal herb garden and water garden. There are extensive grounds and gardens over at Ross Castle, in Rosscabhill, Co. Galway, where a gothic archway leads to the walled gardens. Garden lovers will enjoy strolling among the ancient yew trees, herbaceous borders and box hedges.

Coole Park in Gort, Co. Galway, was home to Lady Gregory and a haven for authors like W.B. Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, John Millington Synge and Sean O’Casey in the early 20th century. Nowadays it is part of the Coole-Garryland Nature Reserve, an important wetland conservation system. There are waymarked nature trails with a lake, river and forest, lots of bird life and the Seven Woods trail connects the woods of Yeats’s poetry.

Back on the Atlantic, Clew Bay in Co. Mayo is dotted with islands and overlooked by Croagh Patrick and here, the nine gardens of the Clew Bay Garden Trail include the impressive grounds and gardens of Westport House in Westport town. The Speckled Meadow garden, also on the Clew Bay trail, is a one-acre woodland garden set on the shoulder of Croagh Patrick, while Árd Oileán, on the coast at Rosmalley, is laid out over a series of levels overlooking the bay, with a pond, vegetable plots and even a secret garden. Further north, the gardens at Enniscoe Country House near Ballina extend right to the shores of Lough Conn and include a walled garden that dates to the early 18th century, plus an organic walled garden. One of the main highlights is a collection of plants from the Victorian era.

Our final stop on our Wild Atlantic Way garden tour is in the drive’s most northerly county, Donegal. Donegal has some of the most dramatic coastal scenery, with remote windswept headlands.
and mountain passes, small and large islands, sheltered bays and long unspoilt beaches. Salthill gardens in Mountcharles is a contemporary garden just 200m from the sea near Donegal Bay. It has a variety of flowers and shrubs plus a vegetable garden and some areas that are well sheltered from the sea.

In the heart of Donegal, Glenveagh Castle offers a choice of gardens — the Castle Gardens are home to a diverse selection of plants, many rare to Ireland, plus trees and shrubs, while the entire estate is a wilderness that was once wild mountain moorland. There are different walking and cycling trails in the estate’s 16,000 hectares, with nature walks, hill walks and lake walks, and you might spot some of the estate’s wildlife such as red deer or golden eagles. Not far from Glenveagh Castle is Glebe House and Gallery, the former home of artist Derek Hill set beside Lough Gartan. The house itself was built in 1828 and Derek Hill lived there from 1953 until 1981, when the house and gardens were donated to the Irish state. In the gardens you will find large-leaved shrubs and plants, and near the lake, different varieties of bamboo alongside South American gunnera and New Zealand phormium which create a tropical jungle feel. Hill loved birch trees, so these and poplars are plentiful on the grounds.

Also in Donegal, the gardens and grounds of Oakfield Park in Raphoe are a fun place for a family day out with lots of parkland and woodlands, as well as a walled garden and kitchen garden. A narrow-gauge train runs 4.5km around the grounds, through the trees and past the lake. The gardens at Glenveagh, Salthill, and Oakfield are all on the Donegal Garden Trail which has 25 gardens of all different types around the county. Falcarragh is a village right on the most northerly coast of Donegal. This is where you will find Cluain na d’Or Seaside Garden, an exotic garden which specialises in plants that can thrive in seaside and coastal conditions. There are lots of unusual plants with sculptures and an art studio on view here also. Our final Wild Atlantic Way garden on the Donegal Garden Trail is Carrablagh House which is set on the coast on the eastern side of the Fanad Peninsula, where the Atlantic Ocean and Lough Swilly meet. This is a well-established country garden, surrounded by woodlands and containing a small walled garden.

A tour of some of the gardens and estates on the Wild Atlantic Way will illustrate their great variety and diversity and reveals what is possible and what will thrive and flourish, even within a few metres of the sea, or when an area is sheltered or warmed by a microclimate.

For more information about what to see and do and where to stay, see www.wildatlanticway.com