

Riding the winds

Attadale Gardens, Wester Ross

After their almost total destruction by storms, the gardens at Attadale were brilliantly revived by Nicolette Macpherson and continue to thrive, finds James Truscott

Photographs by Andrea Jones





As the south-westerly gale bearing salt-laden horizontal rain from the Atlantic howled up Loch Carron into the Highland interior, it lashed the Attadale Estate unmercifully and brought mayhem to all in its path. Mighty boughs more than a century old came crashing heavily to the ground in the storms of the late 1980s, as whole trees on the hillside above the house were upended like sinking ships, revealing ragged plates of roots above the water-filled craters left behind. The gale finally subsided, leaving a scene of wholesale devastation, but, fortunately, the white-harled turretted house was spared.

Surveying what was left of the woodland and gardens was South-African born artist Nicolette Macpherson (or Nicky, as she was generally known), the late mother of the present owner Joanna Macpherson. Until then, the now largely denuded, steeply sloping flanks of Attadale had, together with surrounding conifer woodland, provided precious shelter to the house and gardens for more

than two centuries. Indeed, the normally benign weather, warmed by the influence of the Gulf Stream, had allowed the growth of plants usually considered tender at such latitudes.

‘Nicky saw the chance to create a series of gardens, like pictures at an exhibition’

Far from being daunted by the clean-up task ahead, the artistic eye of Nicky saw this as a serendipitous event, offering the chance to create a whole new series of linked gardens wrapping around the slope above and next to the house, arranged in sequence, like pictures at an exhibition, and designed to provide the backdrop to an important collection of art.

When the wreckage was cleared away, old paths, steps and field drains, long since buried by leaves and soil, were uncovered and

incorporated into the new layout. Seeing parallels with the gardens of her native Cape, such as Kirstenbosch with its sea and mountain backdrop, Nicky’s first move was to create a series of pools from the craters left by the windblown trees. This evolved into what is now the Water Gardens, running parallel to the main entrance drive. With more than 80in of rain a year, water management has always been an issue and this new section and the rediscovered field drains together helped to avoid the prospect of future flooding.

With the assistance of Jackie Mackenzie, head gardener between 1984 and 1998, and advice from Kew-trained Michael Innes, the new gardens and the replanted woodland soon began to take shape. Nicky chose her plants with an artist’s eye, always bearing in mind Mr Innes’s tip: never plant the foreground of the pools, as this would obscure the view of the reflections in the water. Today, the series of pools and waterfalls, crossed by humped-back timber bridges, leads the visitor down towards the house.

Preceding pages: The Sunken Garden with Japanese anemones. Above: A hedge of Rosa rugosa extends along the house. Above right: The bronze chameleon by Alexander Jones on a rhododendron branch. Right: The Betula ermanii avenue

Lending structure and scale to the rear of the colourful waterside plantings is the giant rhubarb, *Gunnera manicata*, together with its less well known and diminutive relative, *G. magellanica*. These are complemented by other foliage plants, such as large-leaved hostas, *Darmera peltata*, *Rheum palmatum* and two kinds of rogersia.

Interspersed among the foliage are sculptures—a bronze heron, an abstract bird, a stone fish—providing punctuation or transition points, not only here, but throughout the site. It is a very personal collection, curated by Nicky right up until her death in 2018.

On the replanted wooded slope above the Water Gardens lies the Old Rhododendron Walk, which culminates in the Viewpoint; ➤





Facing page: The luscious Water Gardens, with *Gunnera manicata*, *Darmera peltata* and waterlilies. Above: The view over the Victorian Sunken Garden, the oldest surviving part of Attadale, with the slate obelisk by Joe Smith framed on the far side

one of the only places in the garden where the relationship between the fairy-tale house and its sheltering woodland, the sparkling sea-loch and the distant jagged blue-grey silhouette of the Cuillins on Skye, can all be appreciated. Along the path are the twisting forms of some of the older rhododendrons, such as *R. rex* subsp. *arizelum* and Sir Charles Lemon hybrids. Others include *R. griersonianum*, *R. davidsonianum*, *R. thomsonii* and the tree-like *R. arboreum*; there are also fine specimens of *Eucryphia nymansay*. The trees that now form a sheltering backdrop to the walk mostly post-date the gales and include two Wollemi pines, a Bhutan pine, *Abies koreana* and *A. procera*.

In a woodland clearing lies the gravestone of Capt Billy Schroder, who owned the house between 1910 and 1945 and was responsible for planting many of the trees that came down in the gale. He had inherited Attadale from his father, Baron Schroder of the German banking family, who had bought the estate from Sir Alexander Matheson in 1910.

The oldest surviving part of the garden is the Victorian stone-walled sunken garden. This is presided over by a slate obelisk made by Joe Smith, a former associate of Andy Goldsworthy. The informal hedging of *Rosa*

rugosa and *Azalea lutea* was deliberately chosen to provide a more relaxed look, with sedum, geranium, heuchera, Japanese anemones and hebe adding to the contrast with the original Victorian rose garden and carpet bedding displays. Nearby, a venerable laburnum, which still provides a bright splash of gold in spring, reputedly dates back to when the house was built in 1755.

‘Among the foliage are sculptures—a bronze heron, an abstract bird, a stone fish’

The current owner follows in the horticultural footsteps of her mother and maintains the same high standards of upkeep, although low-maintenance design has been adopted wherever possible by using groundcover, such as swathes of dwarf rhododendrons.

Many visitors to the gardens arrive from a halt on the Kyle of Lochalsh-to-Inverness line. One of the first things they see on arrival is the Japanese Garden, which they approach via an avenue of *Betula ermanii* leading to

a Japanese gateway. Enclosed by cloud-pruned laurel, yew, Japanese holly (*Ilex crenata*) and dwarf rhododendrons, the raked gravel, carefully placed boulders and stone lantern induce a feeling of peace, solitude and contemplation. This is also one of the few places in the garden where a framed view of Loch Carron and the Applecross Hills is brought into the place—an example of the Japanese technique of Shakkei (borrowed landscape).

As one heads into the woods north of the house, it is difficult to believe that all but one of the wellingtonias and giant redwoods here were planted after that famous gale. Thanks to a climate similar to that of their native northern California, they have prospered.

Tucked into a shady corner beneath the now mature trees is a geodesic dome housing a pool and a waterfall, surrounded by tender ferns. Outside the dome are more hardy ferns and dicksonia tree ferns, which also need protection from frost in winter. It is remarkable achievement and one that bears testament to the vision of a garden artist and her daughter, in whose safe hands the gardens are being preserved for future generations. 🐾

Attadale Gardens, Strathcarron, Wester Ross, open daily until October 31 (01520 722603; www.attadalegardens.com)