

## Borroraig, Number Ten, Diana Mackie's northwest Skye garden

By Antoinette Galbraith

### For Scotland on Sunday

When artist Diana Mackie planned a garden surrounding the croft overlooking Loch Dunvegan on the northwest coast of Skye with views over the Sound of Harris towards the Hebridean Islands she "wanted to create an impact." With the help and support of her husband Alan it is a result she has certainly achieved. Even the drive on a single-track road across miles and miles of moorland, punctuated by whitewashed crofts with stunning views over the sandy bays and rocky cliffs leading to the sloping drive that curves down the field to Number Ten is unforgettable.

For Diana, an artist whose seascapes and landscapes are inspired by the ever-changing beauty of this coastline creating a garden on this wild coast was the ultimate challenge. Born and raised in Middlesex she was steeped in gardening from an early age. "My earliest memory is of hunting for my parents in the herbaceous border," later moving to Skye where she eventually bought, Number Ten a croft, which now boasts the addition of two wings, one housing a studio and bedroom the other containing the gallery that showcases her work.

Initially the croft sat in the middle of a field, with sheep grazing right up to the house and a small patch of docken at the front door. Drawing on her training as an interior designer, her love of architecture and recent experience of designing the garden and helping with certain aspects of the nearby Three Chimney's Restaurant, she set about creating a suitable setting that would harmonise with the surroundings. "I felt the main challenge was to have sympathetic boundaries as the site was a rectangle, isolated in the middle of a field. I wanted to absorb the house in eventually build up a natural looking copse sheltering a garden."

A digger was bought to create the bones of a layout that now wraps round the house and stretches up between the newly planted birch and sorbus besides the re-routed burn east of the croft, culminating in beds on the steeply sloping, south facing ground to the rear of the house. Now terraced on two levels and connected by a grass path with one or two steps this area is easily accessed from Diana's first floor office in the new wing. Later, after the second wing, now a luxury self-catering unit, much sought after by honeymoon couples and people wanting a short break was built, the ground below was landscaped to extend the garden to the west creating enough space for a sitting area.

Protected by a Deer Fence, a contemporary looking row of tall stobbs, staked close together the sitting area boasts magnificent, sheltered views of the sea. Equally striking views are to be had from a second sitting area on the top terrace, this one framed with a trellis smothered in vanilla scented, creamy Clematis Montana. With the help of local landscape gardener Rosie Cameron, stones, kindly gifted by a neighbour, were used to build the drystone walls that enclose the garden and create raised beds. Built in tumble down style "in appalling winter weather," the walls deliberately echo the local field walls.

Once the layout was finished bales of compost "whatever was on 'special offer,'" were barrowed in to help enrich the "desperately poor" soil, something Diana says is an ongoing task. "We don't have enough cuttings to make our own compost," she says adding that she finds buckets of pigeon muck to be particularly nutritious, although the high rainfall tends to wash nutrients through. "Liquid feeds just run through."

The colourful planting theme is based on a repeat theme of bright swathes of colour, spiked with strong accents – purple aquilegia works well in spring, while red geum is a favourite summer choice - and backed by a structure of evergreen shrubs. Texture in the shape of contrasting foliage is all-important: Grasses, especially sedges, which Diana has loved since she used to draw them as a child, are favourites because of the way they move and the way they are covered with cob-webs on an early autumn morning. "Their

texture and movement stand out well against the sea and lighten the planting scheme,” she says adding that crocosmia thrive: “I love them even when they are not in flower as their foliage shimmers in the light.”

Hardy germaniums in a variety of pinks, blues and purples combine with scattered marguerites, froths of London Pride, clouds of forget-me-not and an exciting mix of vertical stands of foxgloves. White, oriental poppies repeat flower in spring emerging behind sharp wreaths of lime green Alchemillia mollis. Bronze fennel self seeds happily. Bog loving plants such as astilbe and iris flourish in the damp conditions near the burn. “Putting colours together in the garden is exciting,” Diana says, “it is like combining paints on a palate or putting a design together in 3D. Every day is different; the light changes all the time and we see all weathers here. The low light levels make the plants appear to move and levitate.”

Learning which shrubs would tolerate the stormy, windy winter weather was a challenge; there were no neighbourhood gardens to observe. “Although the garden faces north we are not affected by salt,” Diana says. “But it is a waste of time trying to grow anything fragile.” Evergreen shrubs such as Olearia, Elaeagnus, Rhododendrons, pines and Juniper combine with varieties of fuschia “a hugely successful plant,” to frame vistas opening up between the plants and highlight different angles. Two wooden gates lead into the field. “We put the second one in to create a focal point rather than out of necessity,” she explains. The abundance of wildlife attracted to the scheme was a surprise. “I have a number of various Buddlias for butterflies and the Rowans and cotoneasters put berries on the menu for the wide selection of birds that are now visiting the garden. The log terracing gives homes to stoats while stonewalls host a huge number of wrens. Eels in the burn were a surprise this year. And now a variety of Dragonflies enjoy the shallow pond area. It’s huge fun creating a garden, I love it.”