



The walled garden's central lavender beds and the gardener's cottage



Angus and Zara Gordon Lennox. Left: one of the many cut-flower beds

FAMILY PLOT

Gordon Castle in Scotland had one of the biggest walled kitchen gardens in Britain, but by the 2000s it had become a hay field. Now Angus Gordon Lennox and his wife Zara have restored it to its former glory, says **Ciar Byrne**

When Angus and Zara Gordon Lennox took over the walled garden in the north-east of Scotland that had been in his family for generations, it was little more than a large grassy field. They decided to bring the space back to life and, realising they wouldn't be able to transform such an enormous garden themselves, commissioned the designer Arne Maynard to come up with a plan.

The walled garden is part of the Gordon Castle Estate, situated in a surprisingly benign microclimate on the Moray Firth, halfway between Inverness and Aberdeen.

'When my husband persuaded me to come and live here he said it was in the "banana belt" of Scotland,' says Zara. 'We have very little rainfall, about the same as East Anglia, and incredibly long days. That means the growing season is more intense and shorter, but we catch up quickly with down south because of the amount of daylight.'

The couple took over the running of the estate in 2008, but it was a few years before they were able to turn

their attention to the walled garden. 'We spent our first couple of years renovating the castle: re-plumbing, rewiring and turning it into a luxury, exclusive venue. People can book for a week at a time and enjoy the amazing salmon fishing we have on the Spey river. Then we turned our attention to the walled garden. It was just a grass field that was mown twice a year for hay.'

Angus's grandmother grew raspberries in the walled garden on a market-garden scale, but after she died in the 1980s it was left to go to grass. When Angus and Zara took over there were 259 fruit trees growing on the walls, which produced so much fruit they struggled to know what to do with it.

'We would give boxes of apples, plums and other fruit to everybody locally we could think of,' says Zara.

The trees were preserved thanks to the efforts of Willie Robertson, who joined the estate as a gardener in 1948 when he was just 14. Although he was in his 80s when Zara and her husband arrived he was still pruning the fruit trees.

'When we came here Willie was about 84, and was still climbing a ladder to the top of the trees to prune them. That wasn't going to be sensible for much longer. Angus thought about what we could do with this amazing space. We're too far away from a large city to be able to supply fresh produce on a large scale, so how could we make products with more shelf life?'

The solution they came up with was to produce a gin flavoured with fruits and herbs grown in the walled garden, alongside other luxury Gordon Castle-branded products such as jams and chutneys. Then it occurred to them that people might want to come and see where the products originated.

'We thought that instead of growing things in rows, like in a market garden, we should make the garden look really beautiful,' says Zara. 'Then people could come to see where the products come from and also enjoy walking around a wonderful space.'

Although Zara has plenty of enthusiasm she is not a trained horticulturist, and didn't know where to begin with the eight acres of ➤

PICTURES: ED BULLOM



Clockwise from far left: 'ribbons' of lavender in the centre of the garden; an aerial view; Zara Gordon Lennox picking flowers with her children; vegetables and flowers for cutting are still mainstays of the planting scheme

garden. This is where Maynard came in. 'I'm very much an amateur, and it was such a big space I needed someone with experience,' says Zara. 'Arne has that, and he's also a passionate kitchen gardener. He really understood our brief that we wanted everything in the garden to be productive. This wasn't about making an ornamental garden, it was about food and flower production on a big scale.'

With Maynard's help the Gordon Lennoxes came up with a five-year plan. The garden was built in its current form in 1803-4 in a layout of squares with a central path running up the middle and another crossing. Maynard worked within this design while introducing more modern elements, such as great purple 'ribbons' of lavender. The flowers are cut and distilled to make an essential oil that fragrances the Gordon Castle range of bath and body products.

'The lavender ribbons are beautiful, there's a lovely patination,' says Zara. 'It's all about patterns and delineating different areas of the garden to make it interesting – otherwise it would be a big, flat open space.'

Maynard has created a series of rectangular rooms, which look dazzling when seen from above. Yew hedging has been planted around the

fruit-growing area, where they grow many Scottish varieties of apple as well as their own 'Gordon Castle' plum. This was bred by a famous head gardener on the estate, John Webster, who also propagated the 'Beauty of Moray' and 'Northern Dumpling' apples. The Gordon Lennoxes have planted 750 more apples as step-overs, as well as 20,000 crocus bulbs for spring interest.

There are four enormous vegetable beds, each the size of the average allotment plot, where they grow more than 200 heritage varieties. In all, they grow about 10,000 different plants each year including a huge number of annuals.

The garden was once a route from the castle to Gordon Chapel in the nearby village of Fochabers, and there used to be an herbaceous border running its whole length so the family and guests didn't have to see 'muddy earth or tatties' on their walk to church. Part of this border has been restored, with a pond in the middle and a grass maze at one end.

The current head gardener, Ed Bollom, takes many aerial photographs using a drone to show how pattern and structure play a vital role in delighting the visitors who are welcomed through the gates 364 days



a year. Produce from the garden is used in the café and for guests staying in the castle.

Cut flowers are another important feature of the garden, which is a member of the not-for-profit co-operative Flowers from the Farm. 'I think our flowers are perfect, they have movement and shape and bend in them,' says Zara. 'It's a much wilder, more natural look when you create an arrangement than you get with rigid flowers, which have no scent because they have been sprayed. Particularly during the summer months we're trying to persuade more florists to use local growers instead of having to import flowers. The flowers you buy



PICTURES: ED BOLLUM

are probably already a week old and that's why they have to be sprayed. How much more lovely would it be if you bring a bunch of flowers that have been picked and cut that morning?'

For weddings, the guests can collect flowers for table decorations. Annuals and perennials are grown in colour-themed beds with romantic names. 'Icy Glen is all the whites and greens; Scotch Thistle is pinks and purples, and Golden Peat is reds, yellows and oranges. When florists come to pick they tell me their colour palette and I say: "OK, go and pick from Icy Glen". People can see all the varieties of flowers we've got and hopefully take some inspiration away.'



Zara is in the garden almost every day, weeding and hoeing. During lockdown it was just her and Ed, although they have since taken on another couple of gardeners and an apprentice, and their volunteers have been able to return.

'My learning curve has been incredibly steep over the past six years,' says Zara. 'I feel very in tune with our visitors in that I have started from scratch like many of them. I know what it's like to plant something and then watch it die or be eaten by slugs.'

Although the garden is not certified organic, they don't spray any of their plants or fruit trees and try to garden as naturally as possible. 'We believe that you should feed the soil, not the plants, so we spend a lot of time adding leaf mould and manure, and we mulch and dig in lots of goodness.'

August and September are a time of abundance and beauty in the garden, with tunnels of sweet peas providing incredible fragrance and the soft fruit coming into season, including strawberries, raspberries, tayberries and Japanese wineberries.

Over the past six years the Gordon Lennoxes have laid three kilometres of path using chippings from a local quarry, as well as using 48,000 bricks sourced from a traditional maker.

'I don't think a garden is ever truly finished – it's always a work in progress – but we're nearing the end of the hard landscaping,' says Zara. 'There's something for everybody here. As a friend said, when you're open to the public you need a view, a brew and a loo. That's what we've created, all three of which are hopefully very good!'

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