

Gardening In Harsh Environments: The Challenge and Interest of Gardeners in Scotland's Northern Isles

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Abstract

Located between 59° and 61° N, the Scottish islands of Orkney and Shetland (the Northern Isles) are the most Northerly inhabited part of Britain. As a result of the Gulf Stream, the Northern Isles have higher winter temperatures than parts of continental Europe at a similar latitude, allowing many plant species to be grown which would not be expected at this latitude. However, the Northern Isles are one of the windiest locations in Britain and wind, salt spray and high winter rainfall make gardening a challenge.

A key step in establishing a successful garden in the Northern Isles is the provision of protection from wind and in the past this was often done with walls of local stone. In recent years it has become more common to use artificial netting and a range of wind tolerant trees and shrubs. Many of the latter originate from New Zealand (e.g. *Griselinia littoralis*, *Hebe x franciscana*, *Olearia haastii*, *O. macrodonta*, *O. semidentata*, *Brachyglottis 'Sunshine'*) or South America (e.g. *Escallonia macrantha* and *Fuchsia magellanica*). Once an effective wind break has been established and improvements made to soil and drainage, a wide range of colourful shrubs, perennials and annuals can be grown.

A survey of Orkney gardeners showed that key criteria for plant selection are wind and winter hardiness, tolerance to salt, longevity and a long period of colour. Consequently, the incorporation of colourful trees, shrubs and other perennials into gardens is important. Some of the most valuable flowering plants during the summer include *Potentilla fruticosa*, *Libertia grandiflora*, *Chrysanthemum maximum*, *Osteospermum jucundum*, *Geranium endressii*, *Buddleja davidii* and *Lavatera arborea*. In addition to garden plants, many gardeners leave areas for wildflowers and plant selected species to attract and feed insects and birds. Rockeries, and areas specifically planted with vegetables or fruit also often feature in some of the larger Northern Isles gardens.

Although the majority of garden plants flower over the summer, there is also considerable colour in the spring from plants like *Galanthus nivalis*, *Ribes sanguineum* and many different types of *Crocus*, *Primula* and *Narcissus*. Autumn flowering is more restricted but includes *Nerine bowdenii* and *Crocasmia crocosmiiflora*. Additional colour is provided by berries and hips of several shrubs or trees but foliage is usually dashed by the onset of wet and windy weather around mid-September. Over the autumn and winter, berries provide an attractive food for several migratory bird species.