

Taking over Winton Castle's pristine gardens presented head gardener Neil Davidson with the unique opportunity to think outside the box, says Antoinette Galbraith

Images **Ray Cox**

A FAMILY AFFAIR:
Francis and Dorothy Ogilvy are the latest of six generations of Hamiltons, Nisbets and now Ogilvys – all linked by marriage – to tend and develop Winton Castle and Estate.

A SPRING AWAKENING



When Neil Davidson visited Winton Castle near Pencaitland to interview for the position of head gardener he travelled from Edinburgh by bus. Alighting at the entrance to the estate he walked in at the South Lodge and on down the winding drive. It was, he says, the ideal way to take in the full extent of the policies surrounding the castle and catch a glimpse of the 2,000-acre estate set against the backdrop of the Lammermuir Hills.

But when he, like all visitors, saw the theatrical outline of the spectacular Scottish Renaissance building with varying room heights, castellated outlines and tall, twisted chimney pots testifying to the input of past generations, he admits to being a little surprised.

'I had been working in horticulture for at least 25 years and at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (RBGE) for 16 years, but Winton was on a very different scale,' he says. Rather than concentrating on small, specialist areas 'as tends to happen at the RBGE', this 12-acre garden presented an opportunity to 'think about things in a different way.'



ABOVE: WINTON CASTLE

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A magnolia in the Terrace Garden steals the spring show; swathes of daffodils brighten the front of the castle; pockets of purple *Anemone blanda* surprise under the trees; head gardener Neil and assistant Sarah in the gardens.



Neil's Corner

TOP TIPS

- Settling into a new job or moving to a new garden, Neil says, requires experimentation. 'Horticulture is so site specific. You can't always know what is going to thrive until you get to know a site. In the long run it's a case of working out what will tolerate extremes and is pest resistant.'
- Daffodils are fairly 'bullet proof,' as are alliums. Tulips are prone to be eaten by rabbits and crocus by squirrels.
- Neil and the team are experimenting with band mowing along the 8m wide drives. 'We are mowing a third and the rest is being left to go wild to reduce the mowing load.'
- Experiment with a natural look in the right place. Try to tolerate plants traditionally considered untidy or weeds like nettles and dockens. 'We are not going to plant docks in our borders but there is scope for allowing them and other weeds to grow in wilder areas.'
- Use poor or impoverished sites, however small, to experiment with a wild flower mix. At Winton the team has sown a Scotia Seed mix on poor land prepared by hoeing. 'Sown densely it will look pretty, keep down the weeds and give something back to nature.'
- Find the lowest point of your garden and experiment with plants that will tolerate wet. Visit the RBGE's new 'Rain Garden' for inspiration.

He soon learned that the grey stone dwelling, the family home of Francis and Dorothy Ogilvy and their four children, where he was interviewed in a hall hung with family portraits by old masters, boasts a 900-year history.

Built on land granted to Philip de Sayton by King David I, Winton dates from 1150. Records suggest the first permanent structure was built in 1480 but destroyed in 1544 during the War of the Rough Wooing by Henry VIII while

attempting to seal a marriage between his son Edward and Mary, Queen of Scots. The Seton family rebuilt Winton but, in 1715 their loyalty to the Jacobite cause proved costly when the 5th Earl of Winton was captured at nearby Prestonpans and their lands confiscated. In 1745, during the Second Jacobite Uprising, Bonnie Prince Charlie commandeered the estate as a base for his army prior to his victory, also at Prestonpans.

In more peaceful times, the house was later bought by the Hamilton Nisbet family. Their legacy of improvements to the house and estate descended via marriage and inheritance to the Ogilvy family in 1920. Francis, a chartered surveyor and Dorothy, a music teacher, took over after their marriage in 1996; they have four children.

A shelter belt of magnificent trees – including a Cedar of Lebanon, a Copper Beech and an Austrian Black Pine, *Pinus nigra Austriaca*, planted in the 1700s – anchor the house to the landscape. If Neil had first visited in the spring, the carpets of daffodils, the highlight of 91 years of Spring Open Days under the umbrella of Scotland's Garden Scheme, would have stopped him dead in his tracks. Drifts of golden bulbs ripple through the grass, glowing in the spring sunshine to the north of the house. Daffodils flank the drive and stretch towards the Walled Garden and

FROM TOP: The castle overlooks Sir David's Loch, created by Francis in memory of his father; spring blossom about to burst into flower.



run down to the dell east of the house.

Closer inspection reveals the display is made up of different varieties but the main player, Neil explains, is the Tenby daffodil, although there are other brighter yellow varieties. Later in May yellow flowering varieties are replaced by Pheasant's Eye Narcissus, *N poeticus*. Tucked among the daffodils are hyacinths, pink and yellow primroses, patches of bright blue scillas and delicate swathes of purple wood anemones.

'Recent gardening work has been to plant hundreds of fresh daffodil bulbs to fill in the bald patches,' explains Francis. 'We shall look forward to seeing the results in the spring.'

For the past 14 years the garden was managed by Tony Subiotto and later by Erika Haeggman, whose skills Neil and his assistant Sarah Payne are keen to pay tribute to. While Dorothy designed the central Knot Garden – a feature of the Summer Garden which is planted with tulips in spring – it was Tony who widened the dramatic border at the top of the Walled Garden in proportion with the tall stone walls.



The annuals, dahlias and vegetables for the house that fill this space are nurtured in a small glasshouse. 'Every year I'm genuinely astonished by how quickly plants go from dormant to overgrown,' Neil says. 'The weeds are even worse. Spring is a transition time for gardeners, emerging from winter maintenance routines into the busy summer season ahead.'

Perched above a pair of terraces planted with magnolia and prunus, chosen for their spring blossom, the house overlooks Sir David's Loch, the loch that Francis created in memory of his father. Surrounded by reed beds that filter the water naturally, the loch has become a major attraction for birds, ducks and geese. Recently a new groundsman was appointed to the garden team. 'We have part-time assistance from Axol [Williams] whose passion is for Forest Schooling,' explains Francis. They have also recently taken on Conar Gow to help with grounds work, thus taking their team to four.

Much is being done at Winton to manage the estate and the garden in tune with the environment. Indeed, the estate is farmed along organic lines – a change that Francis describes as 'significant, yet satisfying. Our eight fields of freshly sown grass/ herb leys are proving popular with the cattle and sheep. We are part way through adding over six miles of fencing, three miles of water pipe and dozens of gates. Field edges are being rediscovered with room being left for big bushy hedges while waterways are opened up once more. Visitors might catch a glimpse of recent acquisitions including 48 Luing heifers, a couple of Luing bulls, four Highland calves, 66 Lleyn gimmers and a Lleyn tup.

'We are taking biodiversity seriously in all areas of our work. We have a long way to go on this and there are many who are now leading the charge whose inspiration we look towards. I would not wish to say we are exemplary and we have a lot to learn with how we approach nature across the whole estate. We don't have all the answers but we are humbly working to find out.' 🌱

FROM TOP:

Ancient carpets of daffodils established under the mature trees that frame the castle; a palate of spring flowers, including hellebores, below the house.

See it for yourself

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www.wintoncastle.co.uk

Winton Castle is open under SGS for daffodils in March 2025.

www.scotlandsgardens.org
Charity Open Day is scheduled for Sunday 30 March 2025, opening time: 12pm – 4:30pm