

# GLDA SEMINAR 2025

# A CELEBRATION OF THE RESILIENCE OF LANDSCAPE DESIGN

The GLDA Seminar 2025 proved once again why it's a highlight in the Irish landscape calendar.

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Images by **Vincent McMonagle**

**H**eld at the Crowne Plaza, Dublin, it brought together an invigorating mix of established professionals, emerging designers, horticultural minds, and those of us who simply can't resist the smell of freshly turned soil. The theme? Resilience – a word bandied about of late, but one that took root and flowered across the day's lectures.

Amongst familiar faces – Jimi Blake, TJ Maher, Dr Christy Boylan – and in the company of industry sponsors like Bord Bia, led by Carol Marks and Kerry Gardiner, the room hummed with expectation. It didn't disappoint.



Kinta Oakes GLDA Chairperson (centre) along with the speakers





Charlotte Hitchmough

## Rivers, Communities, and Nature-Based Solutions

Charlotte Hitchmough Director of Action for the River Kennet opened the day with a message that flowed as fluidly as the rivers she works to restore. She began with clearing the confusion that she is not related to James Hitchmough although she is a big fan of the ecological designer of pictorial meadows. A veteran of water policy and community engagement, Charlotte pulled no punches. She laid bare the sorry state of Britain's waterways – a staggering 80% of rivers in England and Wales fail to reach good ecological status.

Her talk illustrated how garden design can play a crucial role in water stewardship. She wove together case studies of restored floodplains and revitalised urban streams with a refrain that resonated throughout the day: every decision in our gardens contributes to a wider ecosystem. "Every one of us lives in a catchment," she reminded us. "Every paving slab, every downpipe, counts."

Charlotte's pragmatic optimism – and her ability to make hydrology feel not only relevant but vital – set the tone for the rest of the day.



Wendy Allen

## Creative Rainscapes for People and Planet

From one British water-savvy speaker to another, Wendy Allen brought her expertise in SuDS and rainscapes with the gentle authority of someone who's spent years making rain not just manageable, but magical.

The presentation was full of real-life examples from front gardens transformed into pollinator-friendly flood buffers, to educational installations that teach young people about water cycles. She showed us how SuDS features can be more than practical. They can be playful, beautiful, and deeply restorative. Her demonstration of how water movement in the public realm allows for creative thinking around this finite resource included a moving wheel on the side of a building and a SuDS designed water planter with aquatic plants. She demonstrated how we need to react and think more about water butts, about redirecting that down pipe and about using swales in our gardens.

"Designing with water doesn't have to be complex – it just has to be conscious," Wendy told us. Her talk left the room buzzing with ideas – and not just because of the mention of pollinator-friendly planting.

Adam Whitbourn in full flow







Adam Whitbourn

## Reimagining the Historic Landscape at Blarney Castle

As head gardener at Blarney Castle Adam Whitbourn has a job description that reads like the dream of every gardener. For fifteen years, Adam has worked alongside Sir Charles Colthurst to develop an estate which is a shining example of heritage horticulture achieved with ecological integrity.

Adam's session was a masterclass in letting the past inform the future. We saw how storm-felled trees became opportunities, not obstacles. His boardwalk through the Water Garden and revitalised Witches Garden were highlights, a lesson in harnessing character and microclimate to great effect.

He spoke of composting, wildflower meadows, reducing peat – but always with a deft touch that blended narrative with horticultural rigour. "A garden like Blarney isn't frozen in time. It's alive, always evolving," he said. One couldn't help but feel envious of the seventy acres under his care.



L-R: Ann-Marie Powell, Dr Henrik Sjöman, Charlotte Hitchmough and Wendy Allen

Question & answer session in progress



Ann-Marie Powell

## Bold Colours, Wild Forms, and Gardens that Sing

Ann-Marie Powell's design studio has built its reputation on fearless planting, richly layered textures, and an unapologetic embrace of sustainability. In her seminar talk, she urged us to let movement, messiness, and wildness take their rightful place in our gardens. "Perfection is overrated," she said, "but connection with nature is essential." She had us all nodding in agreement.

What made her session especially memorable wasn't just the exuberance of her planting schemes bursting with pollinators and painterly flair, but the generosity with which she shared her design journey. With endearing candour, she walked us through triumphs and tribulations alike, offering practical insights wrapped in boundless enthusiasm. From her use of spring bulbs densely layered between perennials (with a special mention for *Eremurus* "which I've apparently been mispronouncing for years," she laughed) to her thoughtful suggestions for alternatives to the ever-popular *Amelanchier lamarckii* – think *Cercis*, *Cornus kousa*, or *Prunus yedoensis* – her knowledge was as deep as it was accessible.

Her central message rang loud and clear: sustainability isn't a limitation; it is an invitation. Whether through reclaimed materials, native planting, or rewilded borders buzzing with life, she showed us that ecological responsibility can go hand-in-hand with bold, expressive design.

Personally, I've never encountered a speaker who radiates such confidence, warmth, and authenticity. Ann-Marie is a standard-bearer for a new generation of designers, and her creative strength was beautifully exemplified in the Wildlife Garden she was commissioned to create at RHS Wisley.

This was an incredible presentation both on and off stage, truly inspiring by a very talented and powerful designer.





Dr Henrik Sjöman

## Trees as Urban Infrastructure and Ecosystem Allies

Bringing the day to a thoughtful close was Dr Henrik Sjöman – tree whisperer, academic, and purveyor of understated Swedish humour. His talk could have been a dry scientific lecture; instead, it was a revelation.

Henrik, whose 'Essential Tree Selection Guide' should be required reading for anyone wielding a planting plan, challenged us to think of trees not as ornamental afterthoughts, but as purposeful performers in the urban theatre.

His disdain for the 'blobbed tree' approach on masterplans drew chuckles. Trees, he reminded us, must be selected not just for beauty, but for their ability to cool, shelter, absorb and support. In Henrik's world, trees are dynamic instruments in a designer's toolkit. They should warm sheltered courtyards, cool urban heat islands, cast purposeful shade, and anchor views. Their shape and form must serve a function, their species tailored to soil conditions, site exposure, and the shifting climate. To bring this home, he shared a moment from his personal life, supervising his children in a playground shaded or rather, not shaded by a group of mountain ash. As he slowly "evaporated" beneath their meagre canopy, the point hit home: the wrong tree in the wrong place is worse than useless.

Henrik drove home how vital trees are in delivering ecosystem services – moderating temperature, managing stormwater, purifying air, supporting biodiversity. They are the silent overachievers of our landscapes. Move beyond the ornamental, he advised. Select trees not just for their beauty or to tick the sustainability box, but for their performance, resilience, and purpose in an uncertain future. "We're not planting for today," he said. "We're planting for thirty, fifty, even one hundred years from now."

Henrik is, quite simply, one of the most compelling voices on trees in Europe today.



Dr Henrik Sjöman tree hugging!



L-R: Kinta Oakes (GLDA Chairperson) with Michal Slawski, Laura Douglas, Emer Gallagher, Carol Marks, Kerrie Gardiner from Bord Bia.



L-R: Kerrie Gardiner & Carol Marks of Bord Bia with Ingrid Smyth MGLDA

## A Day to Remember

The GLDA Seminar 2025 delivered on every front. From rivers to rainscapes, heritage gardens to urban treescapes, the day was a reminder of just how broad, rich and rooted our profession is.

The unifying theme of resilience wasn't just a concept – it was embodied in every talk. And with exciting projects this season – Bord Bia Bloom, the 'Home Grown' series on RTÉ television, and more – the future of landscape design and horticulture in Ireland feels greener, bolder, and more resilient than ever.

Now, where did I put my Eremurus bulbs... ■







L-R: current & past GLDA Chairpersons  
Kinta Oakes & Deirdre Prince



Edel Feighery (garden designer)  
& Maria Augusta Kelly (gardener)



L-R: Gary Foran FGLDA, Niamh Foran  
(three20designs) & Mary Hackett RHSI



L-R: garden designers Dean Lacey,  
Christopher Walsh & Ed Rawlings



L-R: Fintan Damer (ecologist) &  
Monica Alvarez (design lecturer)



L-R: garden designers Grace Walsh & Anita  
Barber with Collette McHugh (visual artist)



Faviola Muela (architect) &  
Monica Balauca (landscape architect)



L-R: FGLDAs Susan Maxwell, Patrica Tyrrell  
& Angela Binchy



Jodie Murray (Schram Plants)



Colm O'Shea (gardener) &  
Anne Hamilton MGLDA



Paul Martin (garden designer) &  
Ann-Marie Powell (speaker)



Wendy Allen (speaker)





Kinta Oakes (GLDA Chairperson)  
& Peter Oakes



Coffee Break



L-R: MGLDAs Mark McDowall &  
Shane Murphy



L-R: Marion Keogh MGLDA &  
Keith Mahlangu (student)



L-R: Maeve O'Neill MGLDA &  
Steven Burton (Steintec)



Thomas Reaney (landscape  
architect & photographer)



L-R: MGLDAs Tim Austen, John Smyth &  
Marion Keogh



L-R: TJ Maher (gardener & author) &  
Adam Whitbourn (speaker)



L-R: MGLDAs Nicola Haines,  
Deirdre Prince, Lisa Murphy &  
Maeve O'Neill



L-R: Adam Whitbourn (speaker),  
Kevin Williams (head gardener) &  
Frazer McDonogh MGLDA



L-R: Una O'Neill (past GLDA Admin),  
Nicola Haines MGLDA & Sarah Buckley  
(garden designer)