



# LIKE NOWHERE ELSE ON EARTH

Writer **David Lintern** visits Inverewe, recently awarded a five-star grading by VisitScotland, and finds peace and beauty alongside cutting-edge conservation

I am heading north, on my way to visit one of the most improbable of all National Trust for Scotland properties – an Eden where one should not exist. The north-west Highlands pass in a smirr of low cloud. Occasionally, mountains emerge above mist ribbons, but otherwise it is a world of bog, cnoc and lochan. It's a portentous scene, perhaps the lens through which the Victorian founder of Inverewe, Osgood Mackenzie, might have seen this grand but foreboding hill country. And perhaps why he sought to create a sanctuary within it, an oasis of tranquillity and colour by the sea.

## THE IMPOSSIBLE GARDEN

Nestled in the bay opposite the hamlet of Poolewe, Inverewe hugs a rugged coastline dotted with Scots pine and fringed by salt marsh. The garden rises from the shore onto a low-lying peninsula, and is renowned for its historic and exotic collection of plants, trees and shrubs from across the globe. But that abundance at this latitude is not a given, as Martin Hughes, operations manager at Inverewe, explains. 'Inverewe has a few aliases,' he tells me. 'It's sometimes called the Garden on the Edge, the Savage Garden, or the Impossible Garden. In some senses, it shouldn't be here at all. There are

gales all year round but the weather in winter is especially vicious. Add to that the heavy rainfall in the north-west and this is a tough place to make a garden.'

A Victorian gentleman in the classic aristocratic mould, Osgood Mackenzie was given the land by his mother, who bought it for him to fulfil his ambitions as a plantsman. As head gardener Kevin Ball puts it, 'Osgood was known for pushing the boundaries. It was a point of pride that he could grow exotics this far north, and he was competitive with other collectors in that way. You can see that in his writings.'

To make it work, Osgood first had to import soil and then grow a shelterbelt to surround the garden, to protect it from the ravages of the North Atlantic. It took many years, but those efforts were successful. His daughter, Mairi Sawyer, a dedicated plantswoman in her own right, continued in the family tradition before in turn bequeathing the garden to the Trust in 1952. Inverewe was recently awarded a prestigious five-star rating by VisitScotland.

'There's always something flowering here,' says Martin Hughes. 'In spring, all the action is in the woodland garden with a huge mix of rhododendron, but by the summer, the walled garden really bounces into life.'





### **A DAY FULL OF COLOUR**

Families will discover something new around every corner at Inverewe. The heritage garden, first created in the 19th century, contains plants from across the world. Children can learn about the international origins of the garden and its plants via a map with a fun quiz.



**ABOVE**

**Rob Dewar shows how biochar is created. Watch a video online: [nts.org.uk/biochar](https://www.inverewe.org.uk/biochar)**

**BELOW**

**Local diver Jamie Elder offers boat trips on Loch Ewe – and will let you meet the local sea life**

**GARDENING ON THE EDGE**

This remains a challenging place to cultivate a garden. Over the years, the high rainfall has leached the thin soils of their nutrients, and climate change has brought more frequent and extreme storms. But the dedicated garden staff work hard to keep Inverewe looking its best.

One of the many challenges is non-native invasive species, particularly *Rhododendron ponticum*, which can harbour pathogens and is hard to control. While most rhododendron cultivars at Inverewe grow without issue, *R. ponticum* is frost-hardy and highly invasive, spreading out into surrounding woodland and moorland and destroying native habitats. Interestingly, Mairi Sawyer is recorded as questioning the planting of the cultivar even in a gardening context, long before conservation became the priority it is now.

The team at Inverewe have been steadily removing *R. ponticum* for 20 years or more, but in 2020, support from players of People’s Postcode Lottery allowed a new push on invasives across the Trust. Rob Dewar, the Trust’s natural heritage advisor, shows me part of the Inverewe





## VISIT INVEREWE

Inverewe, just north of Poolewe, is a 90-minute drive from Inverness. The garden, visitor facilities, shop and café are open daily, 9.30 to 4pm. Well-behaved dogs are welcome. Wildlife boat trips can be booked via the Inverewe page on our website.

[nts.org.uk/inverewe](https://nts.org.uk/inverewe)

shelterbelt recently cleared of *R. ponticum*, where birch, holly, Scots pine and other natives are already taking hold. ‘We used to call it “Rhodie bashing”, but it’s not about killing plants,’ he says. ‘We’re repairing and restoring natural habitat. I can’t think of any other organisation that’s made as much headway on this as the National Trust for Scotland.’ In its place will grow a multi-storey canopy of mixed natives that are more resilient to future extreme weather events.

### PIONEERING CONSERVATION

Genuine innovation is also happening here. The Trust has purchased Scotland’s first retort kiln to create biochar, a form of superheated charcoal. When mixed with compost, biochar traps nutrients, holds water and, as head gardener Kevin puts it, ‘inoculates the soil’ against disease. The kiln is fed *R. ponticum* cleared from the garden, and produces a substance that’s almost 100%

**ABOVE**  
Between the mountains and the sea, Inverewe is a slice of the exotic in the Highlands

carbon. Biochar retains the pore structure of the wood, so if you looked at it under a microscope, you’d see a highly connected, porous network, meaning each tiny amount has a very large surface area.

‘Not only are we locking carbon into the soil, but we’re also improving soil structure, creating air pockets where the micro fauna essential to healthy soils can survive,’ explains Rob Dewar. This is not new technology – Terra preta (black soil) was the basis of vast ancient civilisations in the Amazon – but it is groundbreaking in a UK context. Biochar is the perfect medicine for the thin, nutrient-starved soils of Inverewe, a virtuous circle that takes a problem and turns it into a solution.

Visitors can contribute to the sustainability drive here too. Inverewe’s restaurant is supplied with compostable plates, cups and cutlery, and diners are encouraged to ‘help the garden’ by disposing of dinnerware at a recycling station. In

**‘Inverewe hugs a rugged coastline dotted with Scots pine and fringed by salt marsh, the garden rising from the shore onto a low-lying peninsula’**

## INVERWE

the last five years, the team have perfected a hot compost system and now, with the addition of biochar and the compostable dinnerware, it generates its own new black soil from raw material in an astonishing six weeks. Inverewe no longer buys in compost, and neither does it send garden or food waste to landfill.

The innovation continues in partnership with AgriSound, a company measuring pollinators, which used Inverewe as a test bed for its insect listening devices. The data recorded will help inform future planting on site, but equally, the success of the pilot project may have impacts far beyond Inverewe itself.

There's a real joie de vivre in how these stories have been brought to life in the interpretation at Inverewe, and everyone I meet seems both invested and inspired. Expect staff to say hello as you walk around, as they did to me. 'People make a place', says Martin. 'We don't work from behind a desk here.'

### MORE THAN A GARDEN

You can easily fill a day or more. Inverewe House was Mairi Sawyer's home and is open to visitors

### STAY LONGER

Inverewe House Apartment and the Garden Lodge (each sleeping up to six) can be rented for short breaks. See [nts.org.uk/holiday-accommodation/highlands-and-islands](https://nts.org.uk/holiday-accommodation/highlands-and-islands)



#### ABOVE

Inverewe is a full-colour experience all year round

#### BELOW

Inverewe House; operations manager Martin Hughes



as a small museum. There's an art gallery, a restaurant, a coffee bothy and places to shop for plants, biochar to improve the soil in your own garden, and more. Trails stretch out into the wider estate, giving unparalleled views across the garden and out into the bay. Those trails, and a wildlife hide at the shore's edge, allow ample opportunity to see the local otters, as well as harbour seals and birds such as redshank and greenshank. If you're lucky, you might spot red squirrels or a golden eagle hovering above.

Martin also directs me to the garden's own high viewpoint. 'In my opinion, it's one of the best vistas in the Highlands,' he says.

For young visitors, a kids' map is the ideal guide to the array of international plants at Inverewe, and they can complete a quiz on their way around the garden. Successful young globetrotters have their 'passport' stamped, while there's plenty more detailed information for those with a deeper interest in horticulture or history.

The icing on the cake for a special family day out would be the boat tour from Inverewe, run in partnership with local scallop diver Jamie Elder. Visitor services supervisor Freddie Plait explains: 'Jamie knows the waters around here really well and he knows where to find the wildlife. Sometimes he'll bring up a creel on the boat to show a crab or



other marine wildlife. His local knowledge is invaluable.'

### THE SPIRIT OF INVEREWE

As I wander through Inverewe's woodland garden, winding paths link small enclaves of trees, shrubs and flowers, spaces that feel secluded, even secret. 'Because it was a private garden, we try to keep it in that spirit,' explains head gardener Kevin. 'It's really important that it doesn't feel like a park, or too contrived. We always try to garden in the way that Mairi or Osgood might have done.'

My eye is drawn to the detail, the vivid russets and greens, the structure of big, brassy-leaved rhododendron and stalky bamboo. Higher up on the terraces, enormous cedars and Douglas firs tower above my head, before I descend to a tiny

### ALSO IN THE AREA

**Corrieshalloch Gorge**  
Glorious National Nature Reserve with brand new visitor facilities

**Torrifon** Sublime mountain landscape rich in flora and fauna

**Balmacara Estate** Slightly further south, a stunning crofted landscape overlooking Skye

bay surrounded by pine trees and flowering gorse.

'When I walk through the garden, I feel myself slow down and relax,' says Martin, the operations manager.

Woodland gardener Tom Cherry echoes that sentiment: 'It's a place you always want to come back to, where you seem to feel at home, where you can find peace.' He's right: there's room to breathe here. But this verdant paradise doesn't exist in isolation; it's part of a living landscape. Inverewe is an improbable garden made possible by its people, a heritage garden that's also

cutting edge. That five-star rating is the result of a deeply held passion for plants, expertise in ecology and an enthusiasm for sharing this unique and tranquil space. I can't wait to return with my own family soon.