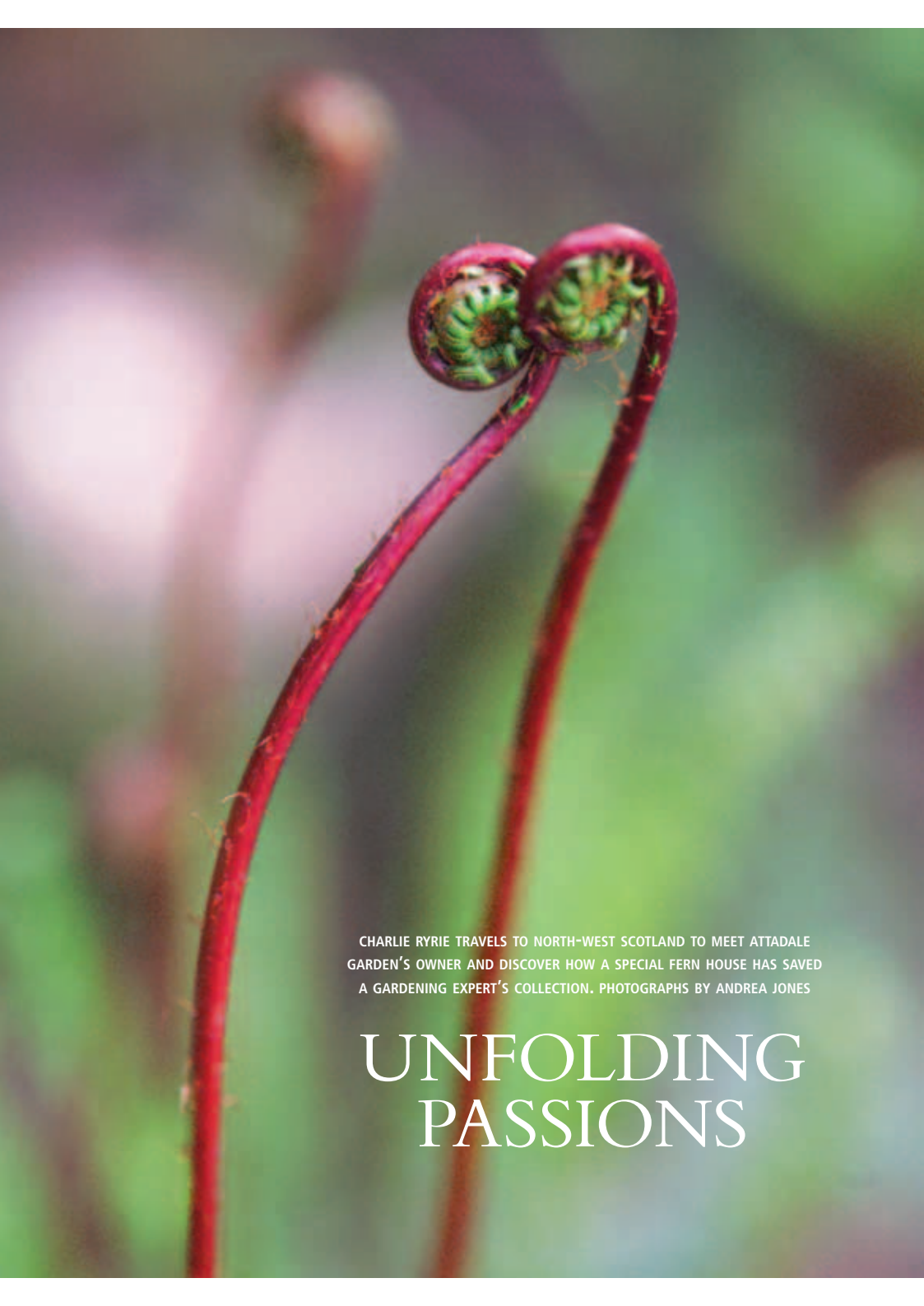




ENTHUSIAST



CHARLIE RYRIE TRAVELS TO NORTH-WEST SCOTLAND TO MEET ATTADALE  
GARDEN'S OWNER AND DISCOVER HOW A SPECIAL FERN HOUSE HAS SAVED  
A GARDENING EXPERT'S COLLECTION. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA JONES

# UNFOLDING PASSIONS





PREVIOUS PAGES, FROM LEFT:  
*ASPLENIUM SCOLOPENDRIUM*  
 'CRISTATUM'. *BLECHNUM*  
*SPICANT*. OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT:  
*DRYOPTERIS CYCADINA*.  
*ADIANTUM PEDATUM*. THIS  
 PAGE, TOP (L-R): ATTADALE  
 HOUSE. CANDELABRA  
 PRIMULAS. MIDDLE (L-R):  
*TRACHICARPUS FORTUNEI*.  
*BLECHNUM SPICANT*.  
 BOTTOM (L-R): *DRYOPTERIS*  
*AFFINIS CRISPA* GROUP.  
*ATHYRIUM FELIX-FEMINA*.



Ferns have always been an integral part of the gardens at Attadale on the south shores of Loch Carron in north-west Scotland. Since the 1890s a succession of enthusiastic owners have developed and refined the 20 acres of mixed gardens at the heart of this extensive Highland estate, where paying visitors can appreciate the fruits of their efforts. But despite Attadale's vegetable garden, sculpture collection and sunken garden, the importance of the magnificent setting and its native flora, has always been respected.

Nicky Macpherson's father bought the estate in the 1950s, and for the last 20-or-so years it is she

who has managed the gardens. "On the hillsides around the garden, burns are surrounded by trees, ferns and rocks," Nicky explains. "The garden is all about trying to repeat the experience." Even so, she had not intended to become a fern specialist, but when the opportunity arose Nicky couldn't resist. Scottish gardener and friend Peter Hainsworth had been visiting Attadale for 20 years, occasionally bringing Nicky new plants, including ferns. When he died in 2002 he left a fine but dilapidated fern collection, and the following spring his daughter Sue offered the plants to Attadale.

Attadale head gardener Geoff Stephenson recalls, "We weren't looking for something new to take

on, but never pass the chance to look at anything of interest, so we went to see." Among hundreds of unlabelled ferns there were over 70 distinct types in a polytunnel, but all were desperately in need of attention.

Serendipity then played a hand because the editor of *Pteridologist* magazine happened to move on to the Attadale estate. Says Geoff, "James Merryweather came down with us and was very helpful in identifying which ferns were worth collecting, saving us masses of time as we would just have taken the lot."

The first problem was how to rejuvenate the specimens, the second was where to put them. Geoff remembers the early days were

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#### WHERE TO BUY FERNS

*Rickard's Hardy Ferns,*  
*Carreg y Fedwen, Sling,*  
*Tregarth, Nr Bangor,*  
*Gwynedd LL57 4RP.*  
*Tel 01248 602944.*  
*The Fern Nursery,*  
*Grimsby Road, Binbrook,*  
*Lincs LN8 6DH.*  
*Tel 01472 398092.*  
*Fibrex Nurseries, Honey-*  
*bourne Road, Pebworth,*  
*Warks CV37 8XP.*  
*Tel 01789 720788.*



TOP LEFT: THE GARDEN LOOKS  
 NORTH TO THE HILLS BEYOND  
 LOCH CARRON. FAR LEFT: THE  
 GEODESIC DOME CONTAINING  
 THE DELICATE FERNS. LEFT:  
*DRYOPTERIS AFFINIS*. OPPOSITE  
 PAGE: *D. AFFINIS* CLOSE UP.

nerve-wracking. "At that time we didn't have any specialist knowledge and the ferns were bone dry and in very poor shape. We decided to wash off every ounce of soil and repot them." This did the trick. The ferns were left outside in shady woodland for the summer and within a few months they were looking a lot healthier, although new growth was slow to emerge. In the autumn the collection was brought into the conservatory because no one knew which were hardy and which tender. "It was belt and braces, but it worked and all did very well over that winter," recalls Geoff. After this, the next step was to build a dedicated fern house.

Siting the house was an easy decision. Beyond the vegetable garden lies an old semi-circular quarry area which is sheltered, shady and damp with a rocky hillside above strewn with ferns such as the vigorous *Dryopteris felix-mas*, the male fern with long leathery upright emerald green fronds, and the striking glossy evergreen fronds of *Blechnum spicant*, which loves the slightly acidic conditions.

A waterfall coursed down the rocks through an old Victorian channel which has since been extended and directed into a new pond in the fern house. Peter Hainsworth had always liked this area of the garden and Nicky had

chosen it to plant maidenhair ferns, *Adiantum pedatum*, and hardy tree ferns, *Dicksonia antarctica*.

Nicky decided that a geodesic dome built on a dry-stone base would blend best with the site and today, as she visualised, it sits unobtrusively in the space. "All a visitor sees from about 50 yards away are diamond shaped panes glinting in the sun," she explains. Only the most delicate ferns live inside the house, as the quarry is scarcely touched by frost and even tender ferns survive happily outside.

The identification process is ongoing, with the help of fern expert Martin Rickard, and Geoff has been busily propagating, with at least 70







OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: *DRYOPTERIS AFFINIS* 'CRISTATA'. *OSMUNDA REGALIS* 'PURPURASCENS'. THIS PAGE, TOP ROW (L-R): INSIDE THE DOME. *DARmera PELTATA* BEHIND THE FERNS. MIDDLE (L-R): *ATHYRIUM FILIX-FEMINA* AND *SAXIFRAGA*. ATTADALE'S NICKY MACPHERSON. BOTTOM, LEFT AND RIGHT: *ASPLENIUM SCOLOPENDRIUM CRISTATUM* GROUP.



different named varieties growing in the greenhouse after a mass sowing. "It's easy to germinate the spores but the aftercare does require attention for a considerable period of time." However, by 2006 he anticipates having a continuous wide selection of ferns to sell to visitors.

One of Geoff's favourites is the glossy light green *Asplenium oblongifolium* or shining spleenwort from New Zealand, but slugs love it too; Nicky particularly likes the versatile *Athyrium niponicum* var. *pictum*, which can be grown indoors or out, its unique variegated fronds offer numerous planting possibilities. But she is equally passionate about the hardy favourite *Blechnum chilense*

with its thick strong simple shape and a slight coarseness that helps to keep it looking good all winter.

Other striking ferns include *Osmunda regalis* 'Purpurascens' with unfurling purple croziers like shepherd's crooks and pale green fronds that turn gold in autumn, particularly good by ponds, majestic ostrich ferns *Matteuccia struthiopteris*, and *Onoclea sensibilis*, the sensitive fern that dies back at the first frost. Nicky finds ferns make a wonderful show under the many splendid rhododendrons that are such a feature at Attadale but she believes ferns will become increasingly popular as they are so good for damp shady town gardens, "Broad-leaved plants

such as hostas make excellent companions, and wherever hostas will grow, so will ferns." Last autumn she planted *Hosta sieboldiana* and *Darmera peltata* with the hardier ferns around the fern house, a thoroughly satisfying combination.

There are plans to extend the breeding programme, and Nicky is continually experimenting with planting combinations and situations as well as landscaping. "We've discovered a new vein of rock in the bank above the fern house, so we're using that in the landscaping. Ferns, running water and rocks are such a feature of Attadale, I want to keep building on that." We'll watch with interest how things unfurl.

#### CONTACT DETAILS

Attadale House Gardens,  
Strathcarron, Wester Ross,  
Scotland IV54 8YX.  
The house and gardens  
are situated on the A890  
between Strathcarron and  
South Strone. Entry is  
£3 and they are open  
every day, except Sunday,  
from 10-3 between April  
and October. For further  
information, tel 01520  
722603 or log on to  
[www.attadale.com](http://www.attadale.com) ■

