

Maurice Mason – farmer, plant hunter and friend to the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin, Ireland

Denis G. McNally¹

Abstract

Maurice Mason is well documented as an accomplished amateur horticulturist and plant collector. His contributions to horticulture were recognised by his guest attendance at the Kew Guild Annual Dinner in 1960 and the award of the Royal Horticultural Society's Victoria Medal of Honour in the same year. He was generous in sharing his plant collections, and this generosity extended to Ireland. His less well-known contribution to Irish horticulture through the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin is outlined here.

Introduction

Leonard Maurice Mason (Fig. 1) was born in 1921 to a farming family in the rural village of Fincham in Norfolk. The family had worked the land of their estate, Talbot Manor, for more than 200 years. Maurice Mason inherited his love of plants from



Fig. 1 Maurice Mason at Talbot Manor. Photo: Valerie Finnis / RHS Lindley Collections.

his mother and grandmother and began gardening at the age of four, so by his 21st birthday, when Talbot Manor passed to him, he was well enough trained to be able to create his first garden. Talbot Manor was built on alkaline chalk, and after World War II Mason developed Larchwood, 100 acres (40.5 ha) of woodland not far from the estate, where he could grow ericaceous plants. The Talbot Manor garden already had extensive collections of trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, and, with Mason's passion for both hardy and tender plants, by 1982 it covered 32 acres (12.5 ha) and contained glasshouses to hold his tropical and sub-tropical plant collections (Fig. 2).

The author of this paper spent his horticultural career at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin and became curious about Maurice Mason when he was tasked with management of the Stove Collection in the Curvilinear Range of Glasshouses in the late 1970s (Fig. 3). The stove was heated to a minimum of 15°C and damped down

¹ Denis G. McNally retired as Foreman in December 2018 after more than 40 years as a horticulturist at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin.

Address: c/o Library, National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin, D09 VY63, Ireland.

Email: denismcnally4@gmail.com



Fig. 2 A view of the garden at Talbot Manor. Photo: Geoff Stebbings, reproduced with kind permission.

twice daily, in the morning and at close of the working day, to maintain humidity levels. The collection comprised various aroids, bromeliads and tropical plants, many of medicinal or economic importance. Each label featured, if known, the name of the donor of the plant or information on where it had been purchased. Mason's name was prominent, and thus began a long-term documentation of the relationship between Maurice Mason and Glasnevin.

Mason and Glasnevin

Mason's initial contact was Dr Thomas Walsh, Director of Glasnevin from 1944 to 1968. The two developed a close professional relationship, and later a firm friendship, which led to substantial introductions of plants to Glasnevin and a reciprocal transfer of plants to Talbot Manor. The story of this Irish-English relationship has been gleaned from a report containing personal reminiscences

of Paul Meath, Glasshouse Foreman at Glasnevin and subsequently Curator from 1985 to 1992 (Meath, 1960), as well as from correspondence between Mason and Walsh (Mason, 1953–1968; Walsh, 1953–1968) and between Mason and the author (McNally, 1990; Mason, 1990), and lists and registers of plants (National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, 1913–1969; 1914–1969).

Paul Meath recounts that initial contact between Walsh and Mason is thought to have occurred while the latter was on a visit to Dublin during or after World War II to buy fodder for his cattle (Paul Meath, pers. comm.). A friendship developed between them, and they started to exchange plants. It was in June 1953 that the first donation of plants to Glasnevin was entered into the accession books as those 'noted by Dr Walsh at Chelsea Show, May 1953'.

In June 1959 Mason spent a week in Ireland and came to Glasnevin for the first



Fig. 3 Curvilinear Range, National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin. Photo: Marie Hourigan, reproduced with kind permission.

time, where he spent the day meeting relevant staff and viewed the various plant collections with Walsh. Following Walsh's advice, Mason journeyed on to three renowned Irish gardens: Mount Usher in Co. Wicklow, Anne's Grove in north Co. Cork and the island garden of Garnish off the coast of the Beara peninsula at Glengarriff in West Cork. Walsh had made contact with the garden owners and Mason was warmly welcomed. Mason made a return visit in June 1965 and again in October 1967, this time with his wife Margaret, when he delivered a lecture to the Royal Horticultural Society of Ireland at Trinity College Dublin, chaired by Walsh, who hosted a dinner for the couple. A permanent record of their presence is in the Visitors' Book of the National Botanic Gardens.

Along with the plants Glasnevin regularly received from Mason there was also a steady

stream of correspondence. Walsh did not share the correspondence in full with his management team, only imparting the sections that related to plants and their cultivation. Contained within the letters are insights into the close relationship between the two men. Walsh, a regular visitor to the Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) Chelsea Flower Show, would arrange to meet up with Mason at his exhibition stand there. On Walsh's return to Glasnevin, a list of desired plants seen on the stand would soon be dispatched to Talbot Manor. Mason would respond quickly and generously to such requests. In turn, Glasnevin would forward lists of available surplus plants to Talbot Manor.

The letters also show Mason's extensive contacts with leading horticultural personalities of the time, including names

such as Julien Marnier-Lapostolle, owner of Les Cèdres, a private botanic garden on the French Côte d'Azur; the garden author E.B. Anderson; and Henry Teuscher, Curator of the Jardin Botanique de Montréal in Canada. Mason introduced many of these people to Walsh and encouraged the horticultural visitors to Talbot Manor to visit or contact Glasnevin. Many did. In April and December 1958, 146 and 139 packets respectively of succulent seed, including cacti, arrived by exchange from Les Cèdres. From Montreal, in October 1959, there arrived 81 orchids with other miscellaneous plants, and in May 1961, there followed 33 bromeliads and 12 gesneriads. An interesting example of how plant collections were built up through this type of networking is that the clone of *Seemannia sylvatica* coined 'Glasnevin Jubilee' to mark the bicentenary of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin in 1995 came as seed from Montreal in 1969 (Morley & Nelson, 1995) (Fig. 4).

After that first donation of plants to Glasnevin in June 1953, there quickly followed more in October and November of the same year. Three further donations in 1954 prompted a mention in the *Annual Report of the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1953–54*. The department, which had responsibility for the Gardens, stated in its report: 'The collections of exotic plants which had become somewhat depleted as a result of losses sustained during the war years – mainly because of inadequate or poor-quality fuel for maintaining the necessary temperatures and to a lesser extent because of the few commercial sources of supply from which these plants could be obtained – were greatly augmented by donations of plants received on an exchange basis from Mr. L.M. Mason, King's Lynn, Norfolk, England.'



Fig. 4 *Seemannia sylvatica* 'Glasnevin Jubilee' illustrated for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* in 1995. It was painted as *Gloxinia sylvatica*. Painting: Deborah Lambkin.

By the middle of the 20th century, the plants at Talbot Manor were recognised as a substantial private collection, and Maurice Mason was highly respected in the horticultural world both as a cultivator and as a plant collector. He was a guest of honour at the Kew Guild Annual Dinner in 1960 and described in the report of the event as 'the leading amateur grower in the country'. The report makes mention of his travels and displays at RHS shows, his eight gold medals and more than seventy Awards of Merit. Indeed, in 1960 he received the Victoria Medal of Honour from the RHS (Anon., 1960).

Another interesting link between Glasnevin and the plant collections at

Talbot Manor bears mentioning. In 1960, as Glasshouse Foreman at Glasnevin, Paul Meath travelled to the estate to view Mason's plant collections. From the report of his two-day stay in the local village of Fincham, from where he made visits to Talbot Manor, one can gain an insight into the extensive plant collections growing in the 38-acre (15.4 ha) garden (Meath, 1960). There were 14 glasshouses for tropical plants including orchids, succulents and bromeliads (Fig. 5). In concluding his report, Meath makes mention

of Mason's generous donation of 240 plants for the Glasnevin conservatories. A further example of Mason's respect for Glasnevin was revealed in his generous offer to pay the carriage costs for the 240 plants, which exceeded the allocated plant transport allowance the Department of Agriculture had sanctioned for the visit.

Mason's collections

The gardens at Glasnevin have long held a prominent place among botanic gardens



Fig. 5 *Streptocarpus* and other genera on display in one of the Talbot Manor greenhouses. Photo: with permission *Country Life* magazine.

in Ireland and Britain. Much of Glasnevin's fame came from its orchids, especially under the direction of Frederick Moore from 1897 to 1922. A passion for orchids was shared by many people at the time, including Mason. Orchids became his plant of choice to collect (Fig. 6), an interest which appears to coincide with his travels to Madagascar. In correspondence with Walsh, he writes, 'By then I had become very interested in orchids and had really assembled quite a large collection, hardly ever buying them but exchanging them whenever I could.'

He collected in Central and South America. On Mexico, which he visited with his wife in early 1960, he wrote, 'It is, I think, the only country in the world where I remember seeing orchids growing as epiphytes on cacti, which would imply that they really did like very dry conditions indeed' (Mason, 1953–1968).

The archives at Glasnevin and various published articles reveal Mason to be a man of generosity, one with a sense of adventure and a curiosity about the novelties of the plant world. His generous nature is clear from his large donations while his intrepid spirit is best



Fig. 6 *Bulbophyllum longiflorum* Thouars. This plant was donated to Glasnevin by Mason in August 1953 as *Cirrhopetalum pulchrum* N.E. Br. var. *cliftonii* and still grows in the collection. Photo: unknown. Reproduced with the kind permission of Hugh Mason.

illustrated by his energy and enthusiasm for travelling to various tropical lands. He sought out-of-the-way countries because there was a greater chance of finding something new there. His plant hunting was all the more successful for the assistance he received from local people and the insights he gained from their knowledge. Mason did not record his trips individually and it is unlikely that there were any formal access- and benefit-sharing agreements in place. Nowadays botanic gardens would not be in a position to accept plants collected without evidence that the laws and agreements governing plant collection and export had been adhered to. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was signed in 1992 by 196 parties (countries and states) which are bound by its terms for full and equitable sharing of genetic resources. The Nagoya Protocol 2010 has strengthened the CBD and elaborated on the ways and means that Access and Benefit Sharing can be achieved (BGCI, 2020). Botanic Gardens Conservation International publishes informative online resources such as a CBD manual (Davis, 2008) from which botanic gardens worldwide can seek guidance. Had Mason lived in present times, we can assume that his desire to explore and collect would have been done in compliance with and in the spirit of these agreements.

In a lecture Mason delivered to the RHS on 23 September 1969, entitled 'The Travels of a Plant Hunter' (Mason, 1969), he mentions the dangers and hazards encountered while plant collecting. On one such occasion, while on a mountainside on the island of La Réunion, cloud suddenly descended, reducing visibility to zero. There was no option but to wait for the cloud to clear as the collecting party stood on a precipice with a drop of a good 1,500 feet (around 450 m) below. Another episode,

this time on the Pacific Ocean island of Bougainville, saw Mason on a helicopter trip taking him 3,000 feet (904 m) up a mountainside. He described it as an alarming experience, as ‘the trees were unpleasantly close’. Travelling from Nondugal to Lae in Papua New Guinea, a journey of 200 miles (322 km), Mason boarded a small, single-engine plane for a flight he described as ‘hair raising’. The pilot, using his knowledge of the terrain and no maps, flew through mist and cloud and navigated mountains too high to fly over. Seed of *Mucuna bennettii* noted as being collected at 7,000 feet (2,134 m) at Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea arrived at Glasnevin in February 1954.

Mason writes too of travelling through dense jungle in Borneo, and the inevitable interactions with the associated fauna: ‘Finding half a dozen thick black slugs attached to your body is horrible, and although they fall off if touched with a match, the tiny incision they make bleeds alarmingly for quite a while.’ The slugs that Mason refers to are of course blood-sucking leeches. And in the West Indies he was attacked by an insect which attaches itself to the legs of passers-by, penetrating the outer skin and causing serious inflammation.

The difficulties continued wherever he travelled. In New Caledonia coconuts rained down like ‘cannonballs’ on the thatched hut in which he slept as a cyclone passed. Like many plant hunters, Mason accepted these hardships, dangers and hazards as part and parcel of his plant collecting.

The plants collected on these travels were not only horticulturally appealing but were respected and consulted by botanists. P.F. Hunt (1969) acknowledges Mason’s collections in *The Orchids of the Solomon Islands*: ‘I also had at my disposal the material collected by the Australian CSIRO Expedition

to Bougainville in 1964 and that collected by Mr Maurice Mason, an amateur orchid grower and collector from Britain who has made an extensive collection of living plants only in Bougainville.’

The collections at Glasnevin after Mason

Mason’s connection with Glasnevin appears to have terminated about the same time as Walsh retired as Director in 1968. The association with Glasnevin was built on the close friendship between the two men which, unfortunately, did not survive Walsh’s retirement. Glasnevin had benefited greatly from Mason’s generosity



Fig. 7 Some of Mason’s 1953 *Sansevieria* accessions (now placed in *Dracaena*) still extant at Glasnevin. From left to right, *Dracaena parva* (N.E. Br.) Byng & Christenh., *D. hyacinthoides* (L.) Mabb, *D. trifasciata* (Prawn) Mabb. *D. hyacinthoides* arrived as *Sansevieria thyrsiflora* (Petagna) Thunb. Photo: Marie Hourigan, reproduced with kind permission.

(Fig. 7). Had the contact continued the Gardens would surely have received more plants. With oil prices increasing in the 1970s, Mason decided that growing orchids was too expensive. He donated his collections to Kew and the RHS's garden at Wisley and began instead to grow *Vireya* rhododendrons (Fig. 8).

In 1995 the Curvilinear Range at Glasnevin was restored. The restoration process revealed substantial deterioration of the internal cast iron, attributed to the warm, moist conditions necessary for the Stove Collection. The Stove Collection was replaced with a South East Asian Montane Forest Collection comprising mainly *Vireya* rhododendrons donated by the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

Mason's legacy

Maurice Mason died in October 1993, aged 81 (Fig. 9). Regrettably, most of Larchwood was sold and Talbot Manor no longer exists. Mason's name continues to be remembered in some of the plants which he collected and grew. The most notable is a begonia he imported from Singapore in 1952 which was known as the cultivar *Begonia* 'Iron Cross'. It was among the first consignment of plants sent to Glasnevin in June 1953 and is now recognised as a species, *Begonia masoniana* (Fig. 10), from south China and peninsular Malaysia (Irmscher 1959a, b). Another tender plant is *Dracaena masoniana* (Byng & Christenhusz, 2018) originally collected in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as *Sansevieria masoniana* (Chahinian, 2000). Two hardy introductions of Mason's bear his name



Fig. 8 *Rhododendron javanicum*, one of the species in section *Vireya* on display in the Curvilinear Range at Glasnevin. Photo: Brendan Sayers.



Fig. 9 Maurice Mason c. 1990 in one of his greenhouses at Talbot Manor. Photo: unknown, supplied by the author.

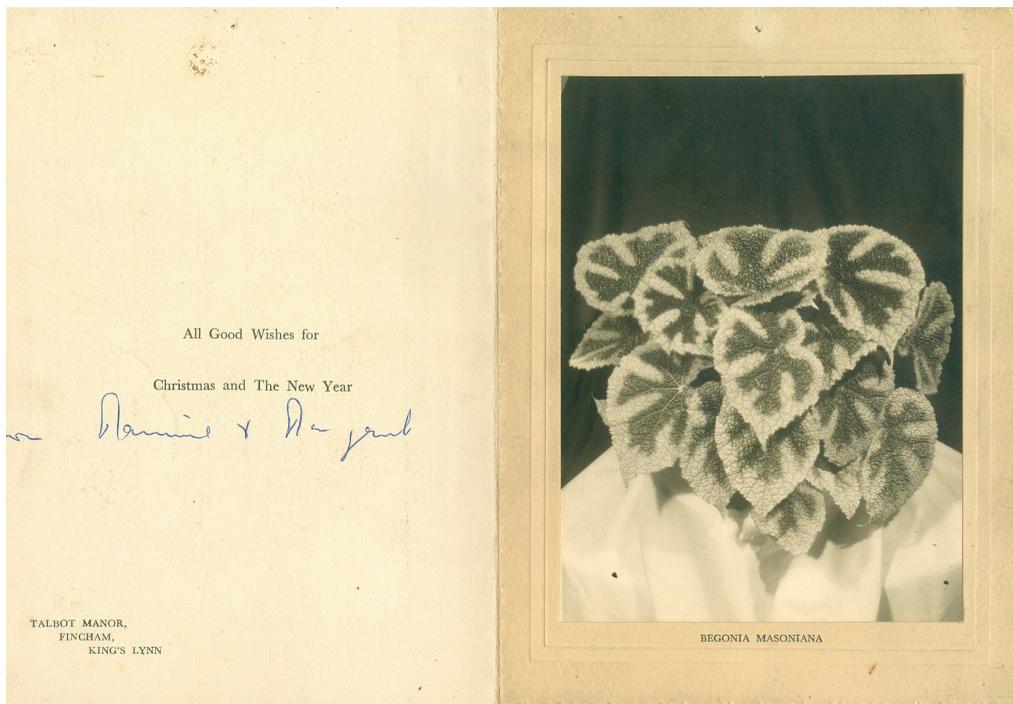


Fig. 10 *Begonia masoniana* featured on a Christmas card probably from 1963. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Library, National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin.

and are still cultivated. *Azara serrata* 'Maurice Mason' is a wide-spreading and weeping form of the Chilean shrub, and *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Maurice Mason' is a clone named by Christopher Lloyd.

While not in the same league as great plant collectors such as Augustine Henry, Robert Fortune or George Forrest, Mason did make a substantial contribution to plant collecting immediately after the devastation of World War II. As a successful farmer, plant collector, creator of two gardens and award-winning plant exhibitor, he truly was a man for all seasons. The hope is that this paper stands as a belated acknowledgement of Maurice Mason's contribution to the regeneration of the orchid and tropical plant collection at Glasnevin.

In Mason's obituary, Alasdair Morrison (1994) wrote: 'Maurice Mason's enthusiasm for gardening was a lifelong commitment. At the age of four he already had his own plot in his parents' garden. In the week before his death, and in spite of serious physical disability, he flew with his son to Edinburgh to see some new plants at the Royal Botanic Garden. He was still planning new plantings when he died. He will be remembered with great affection by his many friends.'

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