

A high five for trees: why we should celebrate Ireland's trees

By Emma Hutchinson - RTÉ Brainstorm, April 4, 2024

Analysis: National Tree Week is an opportunity to appreciate what trees can do for society, the environment and our health.



Figure 1 An oak tree at Killarney National Park. Photo: Getty Images

Trees are one of our greatest weapons against climate change, but are regularly underutilised and overlooked. We walk past trees daily, ignoring and under-appreciating these wonderful woody structures and all they do for us. Generally regarded as being the largest land-living organisms on earth, they juggle many hidden superpowers both above and underground.

As trees grow, they absorb and store carbon emissions, while the soil of a forest can also store vast amounts of carbon. They offer protection against heatwaves by providing shade and cooling our cities. The leaves and bark of some trees help to reduce the harmful effects of pollution.

Beneath the surface, their roots absorb large amount of rainfall and stabilise the soil which in turn prevents erosion. Having witnessed [so many devastating floods](#) in recent times, trees are in fact one of the best nature-based solutions that can mitigate against flooding.

Trees form a very important element of hedgerows, which are essential for biodiversity, providing crucial wildlife corridors through the countryside. They form necessary windbreaks, therefore reducing structural damage from the increasing numbers of storms and strong winds.

They also improve our mental health and wellbeing. A growing body of research [shows](#) that spending time amongst trees decreases stress and anxiety by lowering blood pressure and cortisol levels. Doing this restores our connection with nature.

When choosing trees, it is extremely important to plant the right tree in the right place. Soil conditions, location, environmental factors, and space all need to be considered when selecting trees. But it is very important to select [native trees](#) where possible and this is certainly one way to help biodiversity. We have [28 native tree species](#) here in Ireland and these are best for our native wildlife as they have adapted to live with each other. It is also generally best to source stock of local or at least regional provenance as this reduces the risk of importing pests and diseases giving the trees the best chance to thrive.

Our national tree, the [Oak](#) supports more wildlife than any other native tree. Often referred to as the king of the forest it can house up to 600 different types of species. Other native pollinator friendly trees include [Hawthorn](#), [Rowan](#) and [Crab Apple](#).

However, non-natives species also have a role to play. City and urban tree planting is essential to cool our cities and reduce pollutants. Many trees from hotter countries do this very well and thrive in our climate. The [Ginkgo tree](#) from China tolerates pollution extremely well and was one of the only things to survive the Hiroshima bombing in World War II. The [London Plane](#), popular in temperate cities across the world, has adapted very well to urban life. Tolerant of compacted ground and tight spaces, its large canopy provides welcome shade, while its flaky bark mops up pollutants.

Many different types of tree collections can be found around Ireland consisting of a mix of mainly non-native and exotic tree species. Some of these collections exist in the form of arboreta, namely a botanical garden devoted to trees. These exist for many reasons including tree conservation as well as teaching and research tools. With 20% of prescription drugs coming from plants, it is just another example of the merits of trees. Think [Willow and aspirin](#), [Yew trees and anti-cancer medicine](#).

Last week, the [EU Nature Restoration Law](#) was [passed](#), which recommends a 10% tree canopy cover for cities. The bottom line is we need more trees, and we need to start planting. With Ireland having the third lowest forest cover in Europe at 11% and native cover at just 2%, [we have a lot of catching up to do](#).

[Not only do we need to plant more trees](#), but we also desperately need to protect the trees and hedgerows that we already have. German forester [Peter Wohlleben](#) claims "the older the tree, the more quickly it grows. If we want to use forests to combat climate change, we must allow them to grow old". According to policy scientists [William Moomaw](#), "preserving mature forests can play a vital role in removing CO2 from the atmosphere". Let's celebrate our trees by planting more and safeguarding what we already have, to provide a sustainable future for all.

Organised by the [Tree Council of Ireland](#) in partnership with [Coillte](#), [National Tree Week](#) is currently underway nationwide. It aims to raise awareness about the importance of trees and seeks to emphasise the importance of trees and forests in helping to mitigate climate change and promote biodiversity.

The original RTÉ Brainstorm article can be found here: [A high five for trees: why we should celebrate Ireland's trees](#)