

UCC Community Garden

Set up a decade ago, University College Cork's community garden has students, lecturers and international visitors bonded by common purpose, as **Fionnuala Fallon** discovered when she visited recently. **Richard Johnston** took the photographs.

The cast of volunteers that care for these pretty and productive community spaces is always evolving, much like the gardens themselves. Over time, people's circumstances change and volunteers leave because they move home, or move jobs, or find their once-free time taken up by the busy demands of becoming parents to young children or by re-entering full employment, or because their experience of community gardening inspires them to return to full-time education or to channel their freshly-honed horticultural skills

into other community-based projects. But as badly missed as every one of them is, the wonderful thing is that they are replaced by a constant stream of new garden volunteers.

An example is the lovely, leafy, organically-managed community garden of University College Cork. Located on a half-acre site on College Road, just a short distance from the main campus, it was established back in 2008–2010 during the depths of the recession by a small and dedicated



Mark O'Keefe at work in the gardens

group of students. None of the founding members are still involved in its upkeep, having long ago made the transition from student life. But the three polytunnels that they erected almost a decade ago still stand and are still used to grow a wide range of delicious food crops. So does the garden's small glasshouse, which is still used for seed-sowing and propagation.

As for the fruit trees, shrubs and perennials planted all those years ago, these have also put down deep roots, proving the enduring nature of a garden when it is cared for as well as the great gifts that one generation of gardeners can pass on to the next. An example is the culinary bay trees planted by a previous volunteer, now several metres high. Another is the comfrey plant that a student brought from his family garden in Sligo many years ago, now a proper comfrey patch used by the current group of volunteers to make an organic nutritious liquid plant feed rich in potassium.

As for the small but dedicated troupe of volunteer gardeners that now tend this pretty and productive space with the support of UCC Environmental Society, it includes both current and past students and staff of the university as well as volunteers from the local Cork community. Amongst them is Wicklow-born Molly Garvey, a postgraduate student who currently works with the college's Department of Food Business and Development, where she's carrying out research in food systems, ecological farming and co-operation. As someone who initially came to the garden with a particular interest in the food side of things rather than the horticultural, Molly describes her initial involvement as "A serious learning curve. It's given me a really deep respect for growers, and for the complex range of skills and knowledge they have to possess. Being able to successfully manage every element of a garden, from the fertility of the soil and the health of the plants to proper crop rotation, selecting the best varieties and controlling pests and diseases, is a real art."

But despite the many challenges that tending a garden of this size requires, Molly has found it a hugely enjoyable and rewarding experience. "It's really taught me to appreciate the beauty of a garden. Also, to appreciate how it can help so many people when it comes to managing the stresses of everyday life, as well as making new friendships and meeting new people. I love, for example, the fact that people of all ages, backgrounds and professions regularly pop in to check on progress. You never know who you're going to meet. I recently got chatting to a local man who told me how his late mother had been very involved in caring for it and so he had a really special affection for it."

Molly's own deep affection for this tranquil garden is also evident. "The biggest challenge for me has been managing the difference between the amount of time I want to give it and the amount of time that I'm able to give to it. I'd happily spend every day here if I could."

Thankfully, one of the many great things about being involved in a successful community garden project like UCC's is that the workload of the growing year, whether propagating, regular watering or harvesting, can be shared out amongst many so that no-one is ever overwhelmed. In the case of the UCC community garden, laughs Molly, "It is



Molly Garvey at work in one of the garden's three polytunnels



UCC students Molly Garvey and Bob Burns at work



Oisín Corral watering leafy salad plants



UCC Zoology graduate Sara Leslie in the gardens



Bob Burns and Oisín Corral tend to the garden's plants

The Irish Garden July 2018



Colorado-born UCC archaeology student Bob Burns tends to young pea plants

the result of many people's passionate hours. Because just a few hours here and there makes all the difference." Those 'few hours here and there' include the contribution of UCC member of staff Mary Lombard, who spends almost every lunchtime in the garden. Described by Molly as "the longest thread in the history of the garden", she's been involved in its upkeep for the last six years.

Others volunteers help out on a more ad-hoc basis, giving their time when and if they can. An example is Colorado-born student Bob Burns, who is studying archaeology at UCC. He welcomes the opportunities it gives to meet fellow students and enjoy some off-time away from the stresses of academic life, exams and looming dissertation deadlines. "Plus as a poor student, it's great to get to enjoy the resulting produce."

That produce includes everything from delicious new potatoes, spicy rocket, courgettes, mangetout peas and juicy tomatoes to unusual fruits such as Inca berries, *Physalis peruviana*, which thrive in the warm, protected environment of its polytunnels. There's also a very productive herb patch filled with a host of different culinary and medicinal herbs, from everyday plants used in cooking such as rosemary and parsley to perennial valerian, traditionally used as a remedy for insomnia and anxiety.

The health-enhancing role of this thriving community garden is another important element of its success. For local man and architect Mark O' Keefe, who suffered serious brain injuries when he fell from his bike last year, it provides a place in which he can relax and soak in the energies of the natural world after a lengthy and gruelling period of treatment and rehabilitation at Cork University Hospital



Volunteers enjoying a summer lunch break

and the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Dublin. “I’m hoping to return to work in a few months, but in the meantime I come here for a few hours every week and I really enjoy it.”

Former UCC students also often pop in to the garden for a few hours, such as zoology graduate Sara Leslie, a keen gardener whose own tiny town patch doesn’t provide her with many opportunities for food growing. “The fact that I’m renting also makes it difficult to have my own garden so this place is great.”

Even holidaymakers and visitors to Cork such as Oisín Corral, who lives most of the year in Mexico but is a regular visitor to the city, pop by when they can. He heard about the garden through his mother, Clíodhna Maher, a member of staff at UCC. Back in Mexico, he helps to tend the organically-managed 16-acre family farm where they grow many different kinds of vegetables including up to forty different kinds of tomatoes and lots of different varieties of kale. Young but already an experienced grower-gardener, he’s full of admiration for what has been achieved at UCC’s community garden as well as the growing interest in organic gardening in Ireland.

But perhaps what’s most notable about this atmospheric, pretty and impressively community garden is that everyone involved in its care mentions how much they enjoy the hours they spend looking after it. “I’ll really miss it when and if I eventually leave Cork”, admits Molly. “It’s made my time as a student at UCC such a special one. But it’s good to know that there will be other students following after me who’ll get to enjoy it every bit as much as I and others have.” ■

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