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A green space owned by no one but engaged by all



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Category: Features

In the midst of a housing estate in Dunmanway lies a patch of green land. On closer inspection you will notice raised beds, a willow shelter, a shed and even a polytunnel. Two years ago, this rough patch of land was given a new lease of life by locals. Under the umbrella of the Dunmanway Family Resource Centre, a grant was awarded by Safefood Ireland (one of only 10 projects funded in Ireland), a five-year lease was secured from Cork County Council and a small group of enthusiastic volunteers dug their forks and spades into the ground and set to work planting up Dunmanway Community Garden at Tonafora.

From that first seed has grown a mighty project providing a green space that is owned by no one but engaged by all. Anyone is welcome to drop by and help with gardening tasks like potting, planting or weeding or simply to enjoy the space and spend time with others. On Pancake Tuesday, **Mary O'Brien** had the pleasure of sharing pancakes and a cuppa with some of the volunteers. She found a group of welcoming and good-humoured, enthusiastic gardeners, eager to share this gem.

At present there are 12 regular volunteers at the Community Garden. Living just a stone's throw away, Charlie and Maria Horgan (made famous by their daughter Veronica, a leader on Operation Transformation 2015!) devote a lot of their time to the garden's maintenance, even committing to watering it every evening during the summer months. "We were both made redundant at around the time the project started," says Maria "so the garden has become an important part of our lives."

Every Tuesday morning (10.30am – 12.30pm), Angie facilitates The Sunshine Growers, a gentle gardening group that, as well as growing, provides a social gathering for people who want to garden in the company of others. "Gardening also provides companionship and gives a gentle sense of purpose to those who may be experiencing isolation, depression or who may be facing grief and loss," explains Ita Harris, Family Support Worker at the Dunmanway Resource Centre.

The Thursday gardening group (10am-3pm) is led by Selvi and is open to anyone with an interest in organic gardening. Selvi also runs the market garden at the Hollies Centre for Sustainability and the Community Garden volunteers are very fortunate to benefit Selvi's great knowledge and skills. Selvi is hosting a free Growing Skills Course in the garden on Thursday mornings from 10.30am to 11.30am from the beginning of March.

Tús workers Anna and Kaisa are in the garden every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and are very happy to take any visitors on a tour or to assist new volunteers in getting involved.

Plans for spring are well underway with lots of sowing, weeding and planting happening already. Charlie, Stewart and Jerome have commenced work on a community cooking area for the garden, which will include an outdoor oven, BBQ grill and a demonstration space. Building materials have kindly been donated by local businesses. Once completed, the area will be used for community events and cookery classes using produce from the garden.

Winter salads and leafy veg like chard and kale are still happy out in the polytunnel, where the no-dig method is employed, so there are ample pickings all year round. No-dig involves adding the organic matter to the top of the beds and letting the worms, microorganisms and fungi mix the compost into the soil. Volunteers have also built a hot bed propagator in the polytunnel. "We're experimenting with horse manure and straw at the moment, which can get too hot, but once we get the formula right, it should facilitate remarkable seed germination and growth after just a few weeks," explains organic grower Angie.

Achievable garden projects and families growing together is what Dunmanway Community Garden is all about. "You get more out of the garden than what you put in," says Charlie, who was instrumental in building the shed and has lent his hand willingly to any of the gardening projects.



Charlie and Selvi and Ruby and Darryl
(Charlie and Maria's grandchildren).

Some of the past projects and events organised in the garden have included cookery and preserving classes and a Street Feast, where over 80 people came to the garden on a sunny June afternoon bringing food to share — an experience shared all over the country where local communities invited their neighbours to share lunches.

For the children, there is a sandpit, willow structure, bug hotel and of course lots and lots of earth to plant in. “The preschoolers get great enjoyment from pulling up the carrots,” says Ita laughing “we can’t plant enough of them.”

This year, the volunteers plan to plant enough potatoes and onions to keep the local Meals on Wheels group well stocked up for the winter. There are also plans for the development of an education section, which will encourage visits from local schools. A wildflower biodiverse area is to be created, and of course, a fruitful year is expected with lots of organic produce for a busy summer ahead of community events and cookery classes.

There are no set rules about what makes a community garden work. Each one is unique and just like other areas in life, there are some that gel together and some that don't. Dunmanway Community Garden is one of the success stories. This unique group of volunteers has worked effectively together to create a productive and contemplative space to cater for the needs of their local community. All are welcome in the garden.

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