

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment Richard Bruton and Mayor Mary McCamley plant the last tree in the children's first woodland on World Environment Day, a tree for every one of Ireland's 3,305 primary schools



# CONFESSIONS OF A TREE ZEALOT

ORLA FARRELL gives us an insight into the frenzied world of a crusader for planting trees

To paraphrase a certain supermodel, I would prefer not to be waking up to plant less than 1,000 trees any day!

I'm leading the Irish project to plant 1m trees with Ireland's 1m children by 2023. The project, backed by the United Nations, is up and running in 67 countries now and is co-ordinated by the Plant-for-the-Planet Trillion Tree project in Germany.

We started two years ago by running a Tree Academy in the school where I had run the Green Committee by planting 300 trees in our local park in the prescribed German way; in 105 minutes (check) with help from the Council (Fingal Operations Department team, check) and some volunteers. This effort was the high point of a day where we heard presentations from the two UK schoolgirls who had already attended these Climate Conferences for children and explained the need for this action to the assembled 50 new Climate Ambassadors.

We had had a lot of success in the past, planting trees within our school grounds with help from ecologist Dale Treadwell who has been working on our schools' programme in Crann for many years. One lovely stand of 200 native trees shelters the Senior building from all the noise and traffic of the M50 extension going by. The other, newer Tiny Forest replaced lawn at the entrance to the Junior school with apple, pear, cherry and a roll-call of Irish native trees, one planted by our Minister

for Education and one by the County Chief Executive who came to show their support!

I guess I would be still working away in that lovely school near Bayside DART station in Dublin if it weren't for the fact that we ran out of tree-space. We found the German trillion-tree project while doing research for the Eco-UNESCO annual competition and we were dazzled by its scale. (I add, we won the trophy in our class, in its 'Local to Global' section of the competition.) This was only one of a slew of awards our school was to win as we expanded our tree-planting endeavours. We were winning so many that, in fact, we pulled out of several last year as we had so many

award ceremonies to attend that they had started to take over! One such award, presented to us by Dublin's Lord Mayor, was where we made a film with the Tree Council on Ireland's 28 native trees. We stood in front of each one of them as Éanna Ni Lamhna described their interesting features. That took a bit of running around between the Botanic Gardens, our own school grounds and St Anne's Park. This proved to be a useful reference for us as we now had a handy list of our native trees. Also, having learned more about the importance of diversity for woodland health and making provision for climate change, we have learned about our more recent arrivals too. Beech, lime and maples, horse chestnut and even sycamore

were all on our planting list this year, for their usefulness as pollinators. But I am getting ahead of myself.

A visit to the UK project of Wendy Davis – my UK counterpart and another teacher



**Orla Farrell** is a Board Member of Crann – Trees for Ireland

*'I decided to quit teaching seven years early and to Stop Talking Start Planting'*



– proved most enlightening. With 25 local schools, Andover Trees had a planting programme where each November 1,000 trees were added to their magnificent local parkland, an extension to the Jubilee Forest. Their model was very popular in the town; the ground was prepared in advance with the holes dug by machine, children would come on a weekday with their teachers and special needs assistants and received help from local volunteers. Having been a teacher myself since 1981, I realised that something magical was happening at Harmony Woods, the name the children had given to their English project. Incidentally, you will not be surprised to hear that they too beat a regular path to London collecting environmental awards, their favourite one coming from Dr Jane Goodall, the renowned environmental campaigner.

Now that we had the contact details of all the relevant people in Fingal, we thought to expand our small corner near a stream. What were the chances of finding space for another 3,000 trees in 2018?

The thing to realise, firstly, is that our project helps with so many national objectives and it is a project very welcome to the councils. As a former Dublin City Councillor myself, I know that those in charge of the parks seldom have all the resources they would like, so a project like ours ticks many boxes for these hard-pressed departments. To our delight we got an enthusiastic yes! The German model stresses the importance of inclusion so off we went to explain what we were up to at some neighbouring schools. With careful co-ordination we soon had interest from our nearest primary school across the park, the hospital school, the Church of Ireland school in Sutton, the Community School and the girls' secondary school. We were off! Two of the schools were so keen on the project that they ran planting ceremonies in their own school; in St Mary's, an oak to celebrate their 50th anniversary and in St Nessan's, 180 saplings to encourage the bees!

On World Environment Day in June of last year, we planted the last trees to make up our first woodland, with a tree for each of Ireland's 3,305 primary schools. If each one could plant 300 like we had done the year before, that would be the million! How hard could it be?

The children of our green school committee came up with the name: 'easy treesie'. We wanted to capture the ease and fun of spending a few minutes planting a tree beside where you live, letting Mother Nature do the rest and watching it grow. By planting according to our mantra in Crann and on the Tree Council, 'The Right Tree in the Right Place', very little else



Orla Farrell in Monaco at the launch of the trillion tree project with Plant-for-the-Planet's UN-backed team  
Right top: Applause from Mayor Anthony Lavin (left) for some of the many Scouting Association of Ireland trillion-tree planters at the easy-treesie/Crann Academy at Malahide. This troop planted 1,919 trees to celebrate the founding year of Malahide Sea Scouts.



Spreading the love: Christmas tree mulch bark is applied to Coillte's 1,000 saplings with the easy-treesie/Crann project at Paddy's Hill, Portmarnock

is required for nature to take over. After all, around 80pc of our land mass was covered with native trees, all happily looking after themselves before humans came along.

The Plant-for-the-Planet model of Saturday Tree Academies is an excellent one which we have enjoyed running. Even if we ran an academy every single Saturday, however, a million trees would need more than just a day a week. We all agreed the UK model was very suited to Irish children whose Saturdays, unlike in many other countries, are often very filled with sport, music and other worthwhile pursuits.

Tree planting ticks so many boxes in our school curriculum it seemed very suited to tackling it on a weekday. Teachers, I know from experience, rarely have the energy at the end of the day to be ringing councils looking for land or ringing tree nurseries asking for trees; what if someone could pull it together? I decided to quit teaching seven years early and 'Stop Talking Start Planting'.

If – to paraphrase, again, a popular beverage – did jobs, they would do my job! I get to visit schools all the time (all six in Malahide on the first day of February, I recall, as well as a visit to our site before coffee time!) but when a bell goes, I can have a second cup of tea in the staff room as the children are organised. We get VIP treatment in the Park where rangers and head gardeners escort us round as we pick the most suitable sites in glorious spots such as the Green Flag Parks of Malahide and Newbridge House demesnes. There have been a multitude of invitations to explain our project, best of all in Dublin Castle to the Biodiversity Conference where our Crann patron President Michael D Higgins had words of encouragement for us. The children are delighted when so many celebrities come to our events to show their support. At Halloween one awestruck tiny witch, painted green, studied the Mayor, resplendent in his gleaming chain of office and asked him was he the real Mayor or was he just

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dressed up as the Mayor!

And when the dignitaries come, the media follow. We have had great media interest. We have been interviewed on the Ryan Tubridy Show and on RTÉ Junior, as well as featuring in local papers and radio. When we had a big article in *the paper* (the Examiner, of course) on January 1 this year, well we knew we were onto something big! Next we had a request for an invite by the TV crews! Check out our planting parties with RTÉ; going for 1m trees by 2023 with Ireland's 1m children is a challenge they were eager to see. In Cork <https://vimeo.com/320267562>, in Dublin on News2Day <https://vimeo.com/330463722>, and on the Today Show with Máire and Dáithí, <https://vimeo.com/321932425>.

We have planted trees this season from Enniskillen with the Rotary Club to Listowel's Town Park, from Paddy's Hill in Portmarnock to right under Knocknarea, Sligo. Six counties have funded projects as well as the local authority Water and Communities Board, the Community Foundation for Ireland and tech company Sales Force. The response to requests for volunteers has been superb. Parents and

grandparents love the invitation to a planting party and it is a special joy to hear of the many children with no gardens having their first chance to enjoy some contact with the earth. Often the children can find it quite alarming; we had infants reporting with shock that they had discovered snakes when they had a first encounter with some earthworms. We love to have plenty of adults along: the day becomes a community festival. Business people relish a chance to get into the fresh air, as when the Siemens Healthineers from Swords came in force to assist; they knew an opportunity for healthy local engagement and we were delighted to offer them a couple of hours helping three classes extend a native hedgerow near their manufacturing facility. In Fermoy, Co Cork, we have teamed up with the beekeepers and the Tidy Towns to offer the Gaelscoil and Bishop Murphy School the chance to enhance a local roadside which is now an avenue of lime trees. On Harper's Island Wetland Centre we

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joined with Birdwatch Ireland to enhance the habitat by adding shelter trees with berries and nuts and engaged in some bird watching to round the day off nicely.

One of my favourite parts of the planting party is, well, frankly the party. Hot drinks and a treat for everyone to round off the activity as we congratulate ourselves on our (easy) work.

The German project delights in powering its tree planters with hazelnut chocolate so we knew we were adopting this idea above all others.

We are very grateful to all our supporters for funding our project. Any army, as we all know, marches on its stomach so we make a point of there being a little snack after every work-parade.

We, of course, incur expenses. It's not always possible for the children to walk to the site and we have sometimes had to pay for a bus. Coillte and the councils have been hugely generous with our allocation of saplings. We do use our sponsorship to pay for some root ball





All hands on deck planting the first 300 trees at Bayside DART station at the easy-treesie/Crann Tree Academy as Ireland joins 67 countries worldwide in a challenge

Below: Diarmuid McAree of Crann – Trees for Ireland regales the capacity crowd with his tree poetry and address during the easy-treesie/Crann Culture Night Film, Art and Tree Planting event at Dr Steevens' Hospital, Dublin

and potted trees for special occasions. Setting up the project with spades, trowels and gloves has cost money. When it comes to the snacks we have gone to local suppliers and looked for some sponsorship. We have encountered such generosity! We like to go to whoever is local. In December our planting season started on the week decreed by UCD Forestry Department, just before Christmas. We called it a Christmas Tree Party. On a day with strong sea breezes and heavy showers, the Gourmet Food Parlour at the foot of the Paddy's Hill near Malahide made us all hot chocolate and fresh warm cookies, which charmed the children and warmed them up as they sheltered from rain before boarding the bus. At our planting event in Newbridge House, the Coach House café at Donabate had home-made brownies for us and the children got to sip Lusk apple juice before going back to their school, where they are planting one tree per child on their grounds. At Clontarf Hospital, children from Belgrove school were 'tree-ted' to trestle tables laden with healthy snacks of apple juice, popcorn and more home-made buns when they added 50 trees to the garden. When the children of Gaelscoil Bhaile Munna planted a tree for each pupil in their school at Santry Demesne, the nearby Crowne Plaza rewarded them all with pots of fruits-of-the-forest. Butlers are a great support and what a tree-mendous Easter week it was, planting powered by 250 bars of their finest



chocolate. In East Cork we had the wonderful Bird Hide to host our Ballymaloe Brack Picnic with – surprise – its own chocolate bars.

Now that we are winding down after the bare root season, the first task is to send big thank yous to our myriad supporters, the huge numbers of volunteers with a special mention to the Scout leaders, the Swords Woodland Association and the Student group of the Afforestation Project as well as my family and friends and, of course, my extraordinary fellow members of Crann who have been stalwart helpers, supporters and advisers.

What next? Well as before it starts with designating the public land. Once that is done then the local schools are generally delighted

to come and help out. We would love to hear from people working in or connected with Parks Departments, public hospitals or local authorities where a corner or more may be available to plant in the coming seasons. We can fit 300 saplings in the space of about six parked cars.

We also welcome sponsorship. You can sponsor a tree on this project for €10 or one on [www.crann.ie](http://www.crann.ie) and why not match it with €1 for a tree in Mexico on [www.Plant-for-the-Planet.com](http://www.Plant-for-the-Planet.com) and offset some of the carbon you use when you burn dirty fuels.

We have reached the 15,000 tree mark this year. Be part of the solution for global overheating and biodiversity collapse!

Go on, Go on, Go on!