



Main picture: all hands to work at the Grow Community Garden, Waterworks, Belfast. Above, mud, glorious mud and, below, children with a to-do list

ALL PHOTOS ROS DRINKWATER



Growing community spirit

A community garden in Belfast has helped bring a wide variety of people together, and plants aren't the only things to have benefited



Ros Drinkwater

The Waterworks – a public park in North Belfast surrounded by a patchwork of nationalist and loyalist areas that have seen more than their fair share of violence, including petrol and pipe bombs – is Ireland's most unlikely community garden. For decades, the 50 by 30 foot plot

was a waste ground, a no-man's land bounded by the Peace Line, a 28-foot-high fence erected to keep warring sectarian factions at bay.

The woman behind this ambitious project is Siobhan Craig, a local resident with an impressive track record for getting things up and running. Three years ago she set up Grow, a charity funded by a small lottery grant to help those suffering from anxiety and depression through the medium of a community garden near Bangor.

"When I got the idea to make a second garden here in the Waterworks people thought I was mad," she said. "It'll be trashed in a week was the typical comment."

Two years on the garden is thriving.

"Grow is all about community –

'The TV gardening programmes make it look so easy and it is, but only if you know what you're doing'

celebrating its diversity and promoting equality," Craig said.

"We have a core group of 30 regulars from both sides of the divide, plus asylum seekers from as far afield as Lebanon and Eritrea. A further 60 to 100 people drop in once a month. Fresh garden produce is all about health and wellbeing, learning not just how to grow but to cook food. More importantly, our aim is to grow a community around the garden, so it becomes a hub – the garden is the means of achieving that."

Community gardens are a modern phenomenon found the world over. There are around 100 across Ireland and the latest development is Grow It Yourself's (GIY) 2012 in-



A weeding detail gets stuck in

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initiative to support community food growing by providing practical advice, training, support and networking opportunities to groups wanting to establish community food-growing projects, and to landowners who have land available.

GIY is a national, community-based organisation established in 2009 to promote the benefits of people growing their own food. "The community garden is a very important feature of any community. It should be at the centre, part of the infrastructure in any development plan," said GIY project manager Ciaran Walsh.

"We're working with 15 community gardens in Co Dublin. These have been set up through the Community Foundation for Ireland growers fund that provides finance for community gardens in disadvantaged areas.

"The whole idea is that people who have been growing for a number of years in their back gardens can share their knowledge and experience and mentor the novice growers. There's nothing more disheartening than trying to grow something and not being successful."

On the day I visited the Waterworks, it was the first serious spring session. Plastic that had been suppressing weeds over the winter had to be removed from the vegetable beds, and the fruit beds badly needed weeding. The polytunnel was crammed full of pot plants ready for planting out and the youngsters couldn't wait to get at the huge hillock of black gold – compost made from recycled green garden waste donated by Belfast City Council.

The oldest gardener on duty that day was 82, the youngest was four, but youth and inexperience proved to be no barriers to usefulness. Under the tutelage of her eight-year-old sister Blathaid, four-year-old



Caoimhe (4) and Blathnaid (8), two of the youngest gardeners at Grow Community Garden, Waterworks

Caoimhe proved she had mastered the knack of filling seed trays with soil ready for sowing seeds. Two more youngsters, Jack and Abygail, waited their turn to plant, and were swapping gardening tips.

Martin and Eoin are a father and son team tackling deep-rooted winter weeds – Eoin confided that although his dad was an accomplished gardener, his own favourite bit was eating the produce. Another dad found a task for his five year-old son: emptying the contents of unwanted pots into

the compost heap.

Eilis and Dario, who live across the road, have dropped in for the first time. "We like the broad aims of the project," said Eilis. "It's really productive and we'll certainly join." I daresay their five year-old son Oisín will insist on it – who would have thought mud could be so much fun? For more than a century the allotment offered those without gardens a space to grow edibles, and by the 1940s virtually every town in Ireland had a dedicated site. Demand for allotments rose during the days of the Celtic tiger, when 'growing your own' became hugely fashionable.

With recession and the need to economise, interest increased with a vengeance, resulting in long waiting lists, particularly for urban allotments, but recently these have been getting a bad press. There have been reports of councils



Martin and Eoin Reid, father and son gardeners at the Waterworks garden

sending out warning letters to holders of neglected plots – at most always beginners who have underestimated the learning curve that gardening involves. If the warning is ignored, the holder forfeits the plot.

This illustrates one of the problems with allotments – that unless a novice is fortunate with his neighbouring gardeners, they are left to his own devices and can be easily discouraged when things don't work out as planned. Every community garden, however, has an experienced gardener on hand to teach best practice.

At the Waterworks, this task falls to Justin Nicholl who is not only an expert on growing edibles, but as a trained chef, knows how to cook them. "I'd say only about 10 per cent of the people who come here are aware of how easy it is to grow good, healthy food from scratch, and at minimum cost," he said.

"Outdoors we grow everything from the staples – spuds, carrots, cabbage, turnips – to the less familiar globe artichokes, Jerusalem artichokes, wild strawberries and every herb going. In the polytunnel we have tomatoes, aubergines, chilis and salad crops. Everything we grow is shared among the gardeners. Once a fortnight we

have a cookery session and we also contribute to a supper

club. Some days we go foraging on Cavehill to pick wild garlic – people can't believe you can have food without buying it."

Nicholl's most ambitious project was 'growing' bread last year. "We planted a bed of wheat, just enough for a few loaves, winnowed it, threshed it, milled it, baked it, and then sat down together to have home-made soup and soda bread."

The gardeners range from experienced to complete novices, and the motive for joining isn't always veggie-related. Joe is an old hand at growing vegetables, but he comes here for the company. Jim confessed he was not a huge vegetable fan. "For me, the real benefit of being here is the effect of the sheer physical effort – it's the best tonic I know to blow away cobwebs and help you forget your troubles," he said.

Susie said she had spent several unsuccessful seasons trying to grow vegetables in her back garden.

"The TV gardening programmes make it look so easy, and it is, but only if you know what you're doing. I hadn't a

clue. My compost heap was a great plastic barrel of evil-smelling brown slush. Half the seeds I planted disappeared, and those that did grow were eaten by pests. In the end I gave up," she said.

"Here I'm learning where I went wrong and I'm so impressed with the stuff in the polytunnel I'm thinking of getting a small one for my own garden."

Tasks are allotted in rota, working outdoors (not always fun in the rain), indoors in the polytunnel, and being on the coffee and tea detail. The tea break is a lively affair that underlines the social aspect of the project. Over a feast of snacks and good coffee, conversations range from a foolproof way to control slugs, to a recipe for hummus, to the merits of Richard Dawkins's best seller *The God Delusion*.

For most people gardening is a rewarding recreation, but it goes a little further with Lynda. Two years ago a devastating family tragedy left her traumatised. "I lost all my confidence, I couldn't leave the house, the only time I went out was for a

once a week trip to the shops," she said.

"Then my counsellor saw an advertisement for Grow and suggested I give it a try. I came along for the first session and it has turned my whole life around. I used to hide in the background, now I'm right up front. I'm running a gardening club for seven- to ten-year-olds in my daughter's school, and I'm doing a Royal Horticultural Society course with the aim of becoming a professional gardener."

"We come from a huge range of cultures and religions, but we all bond together. Someone always knows something you don't – everyone brings something to the table. Grow has given me my life back."

As to finding a community garden in your area, GIY is working on a map for their website.

Until that appears, log onto their site and contact them through the forum – they'll point you in the right, green direction.

giyireland.com/grow-ni.org

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