forestry

Hedgeschools reborn: the Forest School

If you go down to the woods today...you might be greeted by the Forest School. An initiative by forestry enthusiast Greta Ryan – it seeks to educate young people about nature and how plants interact with each other

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Greta sharing her plant knowledge with youngsters in the Forest School.

Francie McPeake from Belfast wrote 'Wild Mountain Thyme' in 1947. To many, it's a classic Irish song that has been sung by generations inspired by the Clancy Brothers from Tipperary.

Indeed, we all walk the fields and forests of the countryside, but have we ever paid real attention to the abundance of plants that are all around us, especially in the late summer and early autumn? These teem with animals, and insects who live, and feed and breed and thrive. We know this as 'biodiversity'.

Plants can cure all kinds of ailments, but plants can also kill under a different set of circumstances; beef wellington anyone? Several herbs commonly found in Irish forests include hawthorn, comfrey, nettle, wild garlic, burdock, meadowsweet, and yarrow. Some of these herbs, such as hawthorn and others mentioned, are also considered sacred in Celtic traditions.

They have been used for centuries. Irish award-winning playwright Máebh de Brún demonstrated this in her recent play "Dead Man's Bells," where the tragedy centred on the understanding of the power of plants. Knowing and understanding plants is something that all farmers should have at least a basic understanding of. And while the Clancy Brothers were inspired by the landscape around Carrick on Suir, a young woman has been equally inspired by the landscape of the Slieve Felim mountains in another part of Tipperary.

Greta Ryan has combined her interest in forests and her local landscape with her knowledge of herbs, plants, and forest biodiversity to establish her Forest School. She has launched a business training program to educate others on using forest plants and herbs. Having qualified as a primary school teacher in 2017 Greta admits that teaching in the classroom did not fulfil her love of active learning within nature.

"I always had an interest in walking. When walking, I looked at the plants in the hedgerow and became interested in what each plant was," says Greta. This love of identifying plants was brought to another level when she rambled through the hills and native woodlands on her uncle's farm.

"I would see tall trees, mosses, and lichens grow—the leaves at the top and lots of plants and flowers. I learned about them, their names, and their part in folklore and culture.

When the pandemic hit, Greta, like many others, revaluated her career. While she acknowledges the value of teaching, she longed for something more. In 2020, she turned her interest in forest plants and herbs into a profession, enrolling in an herbalist degree program. By 2024, she had qualified as a herbalist and had set up her forest school, sharing her knowledge with the next generation,

Forest schools, in their essence, are about learning about how plants interact with each other. And how we can build and share our knowledge of wood as a material that creates our houses, cooks our food, and produces the air we breathe.

"The forest school is the start," Greta said when asked about the driving force of her interest in nature. Greta is also an accomplished accordion player. "It's a wind instrument. The reeds come from wood. Someone somewhere grew the tree, and it's now used to make music.

"As a teacher, I've examined various education systems and types of learning. Do we allow free thought, or do we allow students choices within our system? How do we pass on essential skills, or are we overwhelming students with the overuse of textbooks? I allow my students to engage with nature and learn through thorough observation and questioning. This, I believe, shows them that they, too, are part of this web or ecosystem of life.

"I intend to develop foraging workshops for adults shortly and allow participants to cook and prepare what they have collected. Our woodlands are full of many different food types, including game, leaves, seeds and nuts, fruits, tubers and roots, sap, gum, and fungi, to name but a few."

Greta has begun this venture, which is still in its early stages. A solid foundation is half the battle. For people to understand our environment, it's necessary to show them that woodland provides many products and uses. She draws upon her knowledge of her Tipperary heritage and the surrounding hills' plants. For the most part, this is the most crucial part. We all come from somewhere. We are all going somewhere. This is what grows every one of us.

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Native trees and medicinal properties

- Whitethorn manages heart conditions, including high blood pressure, angina, and heart failure.
- Blackthorn, especially their berries (sloes) and flowers, have a long history of use in traditional medicine for various ailments. Sloes have been used to make gin, wine, and jelly. However, the berries are also used to treat gastrointestinal issues and serve as a source of antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals. Additionally, the flowers and leaves have been used for their astringent and anti-inflammatory properties.
- Alder is used for its anti-inflammatory, astringent, and antiseptic properties. The bark and leaves have been used to treat various conditions, including sore throats, fever, and skin ailments.
- Scots pine needles are rich in vitamin C and have been used to prevent and treat scurvy. The needles, bark, and resin contain essential oils with antiseptic and anti-inflammatory properties. These oils can treat respiratory conditions such as colds, bronchitis, and sinusitis. Inhaling steam infused with pine oil can help clear nasal passages and relieve congestion.
- Rowan berries have a long history of medicinal use. They are rich in vitamin C and antioxidants, which can help boost the immune system and promote overall health. Traditionally, rowan berries have been used to treat digestive issues, such as diarrhoea and indigestion. Additionally, various parts of the rowan tree, including the bark and leaves, have been utilized in folk medicine for their astringent and anti-inflammatory properties.
- Oak bark has been utilized in traditional medicine for its astringent and antiseptic properties. It is applied externally to treat skin conditions such as eczema, cuts, and insect bites. Additionally, oak leaves and acorns have been used in folk remedies for various ailments.
- Birch bark contains betulin and betulinic acid, which are known for their anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties. The inner bark has been used in teas and poultices to treat arthritis, rheumatism, and skin disorders. Birch sap is harvested in many parts of the world, including Ireland. It's used for its detoxifying and diuretic effects.