

# Report

## Forum Synergies scholarship programme.

**Trainee:** Tine Bielen, Zonhoven - Belgium

**Host:** Joanne Butler, Gortahork – Ireland

**Place:** OURganic Gardens, Gortahork - Ireland

**Period:** 02/08/19 – 07/09/19



ECO-EDUCATION . COMMUNITY .  
ECOTOURISM

## OURganic Gardens

GORTAHORK . DONEGAL . IRELAND .



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## 1 Profile

After having worked a couple of years in the medical field as a Podiatrist, I felt my professional life was lacking passion and deeper meaning. So in 2017, I decided to take a year off work and started studying again. I chose a postgraduate in Sustainable Development at Vives University College, Kortrijk - Belgium . As a part of this, I lived for five months in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland, where I did my internship within three organisations: Cultivate, ECOLISE and the ecovillage community. Gaining more in-depth knowledge as well as practical experience in sustainability, I realised that was what I wanted to be involved in - on a professional as well as on a personal level.

After returning from Ireland in June 2018, I graduated with my postgraduate certificate in Sustainable Development. I decided to permanently leave my job as a podiatrist and to choose the direction of sustainability in my life. Last year I attended the European Ecovillage Network Conference in Estonia on several aspects of sustainable living in European ecovillages. In order to expand my knowledge and experience in this field, I attended several conferences, workshops and courses such as a Permaculture Design Course (PDC) in Portugal.

Currently, I am trying to find my professional path and future in sustainable development, knowing that my interest is mostly in the environmental aspect of sustainability, with a link also to the social and community aspect of sustainable development.

## 2 Motivation

I learnt about the Forum Synergies scholarship programme from a colleague and friend in Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Olliver Moore. This scholarship programme was an ideal opportunity for me to gain more practical insight and experience in rural sustainable development, in food, agriculture and horticulture. These are the topics that interest me most about sustainable development. After spending the five months in Cloughjordan Ecovillage last year, I realised that I learn best by experience. I heard about OURganic gardens during my internship and it appealed to me because it covers most of the topics I want to learn about: permaculture, community gardens, organic growing - farming - horticulture, sustainable lifestyle, eco-education and therapeutic and social gardening.

Moreover, I am thinking about setting up my own project in the future, quite similar to Joanne's OURganic Gardens. Because I am insecure about starting on my own, I thought that experiencing and being involved in a similar project would give me a better understanding of what is entailed, as well as helping me realise if this is really what I want to do in the future.

So when I saw OURganic gardens appear amongst the list of hosts, I didn't hesitate for one second and contacted Joanne immediately.

## 3 Activities

### 3.1 Work in the garden:

I had the opportunity to take part in several activities in the garden: harvesting vegetables, preparing CSA vegetable boxes, sowing, weeding, preparing the vegetable beds, learning about horticulture, no dig gardening, tree planting, permaculture, learning how to propagate plants through cuttings and so much more.



### 3.2 Tree bud grafting workshop, Monaghan:

Joanne and I took part in a T-grafting workshop, where we learnt all about tree bud grafting of fruit trees. After a brief theoretical introduction we directly went into practice and started grafting in the orchard of the host.





### 3.3 Mushroom foraging, Dunlewey:

As a part of a local festival, we took part in a mushroom foraging forest walk and talk in the area, where we learnt about the different types of mushrooms.



### 3.4 Study time:

I got the opportunity to look into Joanne's eco-sustainable library and to read and discover some great books and authors on sustainable development, organic gardening etc. For me personally, my greatest discovery has been Mary Reynolds. She is an Irish landscape designer who won a gold medal at the famous Chelsea Flower Show and has designed gardens internationally. With her roots in natural gardening theory, Mary seeks to create spaces that are healing and stimulating biodiversity, drawing on ancient methods of working with the land and using them to invite the power and energy of nature back into our lives. Joanne and I also watched the movie about Mary Reynolds life, "Dare to be wild", together. We are both intrigued by herself and her work.



### 3.5 Volunteer Thursday's:

Every Thursday, from 10AM-1PM, the garden is open to volunteers. It's a lovely moment to connect with like-minded people, while working together in the garden. Joanne provides a task list and the volunteers rotate between different tasks. When the work is finished, we share lunch from the garden harvest, tea and coffee.





### 3.6 Donegal Food Producer showcase 2019, Oakfield Park:

The Food Coast – Donegal’s Good Food Initiative has the overall aim of acting as the central platform for establishing Donegal as a “food county” – a place with a vibrant food culture and food economy. This initiative is open to anyone with an interest in the County’s food sector – from start-up businesses to part-time food producers, from on-farm added value producers to established primary producers, manufacturers, distributors, retailers and restaurants.

Critical to the overall initiative, both its delivery and success is the active engagement of food enterprises and food enthusiasts in the delivery of the identified actions. The actions under the Food Coast Initiative are grouped under four broad themes.

With OURganic Gardens we took part in the Donegal Food Producer showcase in Oakfield Park. Here, we presented OURganic Gardens as a project about eco-education, local - organic and community supported food production and eco-tourism. We put up a stall with freshly picked vegetables and flowers, leaflets and information about our upcoming courses and events.



### 3.7 Walk and talk garden tour, OURganic gardens:

On a weekly basis, Joanne hosts “garden walk and talk tours” when she invites budding horticulturists or anyone else interested in vegetable gardens, fruit growing and sustainable permaculture projects.

Participants gain first hand experience and learn what the growing season is like in Donegal. Joanne takes her guests on a two hour guided walking tour through her project, sharing the history, the mission and story behind OURganic Gardens.





### 3.8 Attending meetings:

During the Community Gardens Ireland meetings the committee discusses the successes and the difficulties that they face, as well as financial planning (expenses and costs from different fundings/grants) and insurance regulations. They reflect on past events and plan new ones (apple pruning workshop, no - dig garden demonstration, kombucha making session...). Many of the meetings I attended were about planning and discussing the Global Green area at the Electric Picnic festival and the involvement of Community Gardens Ireland in this festival.

Joanne and I also attended a local PPN (Public Participation Network) meeting in Letterkenny. A representative of the local county council of Donegal presented their draft climate change adaptation strategy 2019 - 2024, talking about the impact of climate change for Ireland. Goals and vision for a climate ready Donegal were presented even as the action plan goals: critical infrastructure and buildings, natural and cultural heritage, water resources and flood risk management, and community services.

After this presentation, the representatives of the local community groups initiated a group discussion where they discussed their own action plan regarding sending in submissions. Attending this meeting was very interesting as I could hear the different voices and concerns of several local community groups.



### 3.9 Attending the “Save Ballyness Bay” meeting:

Gathering with the local community of Gortahork area to gain info about a planned oyster - and shellfish farm in Ballyness Bay. The planned farm would affect the local, rural area in many different ways: Ballyness Bay is a protected wildlife and biodiversity area and local flora and fauna would be endangered. It would also affect the local employment and eco-tourism: the farm would only create 4 jobs and the profit would go to French private companies, while hundreds of local jobs would be threatened since every year many eco-tourists come to visit and stay in the area. Also the area’s social life would be affected as many people go surfing, swimming and walking in the bay. Attending this meeting gave me a good example of the importance and power of local communities and bottom-up action for rural sustainable development.



### 3.10 Help construct a CSA stall:

In the beginning when I arrived at OURganic gardens, Joanne was delivering the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) packages by herself, driving to every customer in Donegal. After reflecting about it together, we realised this didn't fit in the idea of a CSA and wasn't very sustainable.

We needed to focus more on the local aspect of it so the idea arose to create a stall where we are from now on providing weekly freshly picked vegetables, flowers and jams. People can contribute through a gift in an "honesty box".







### 3.11 Love food, hate waste workshop:

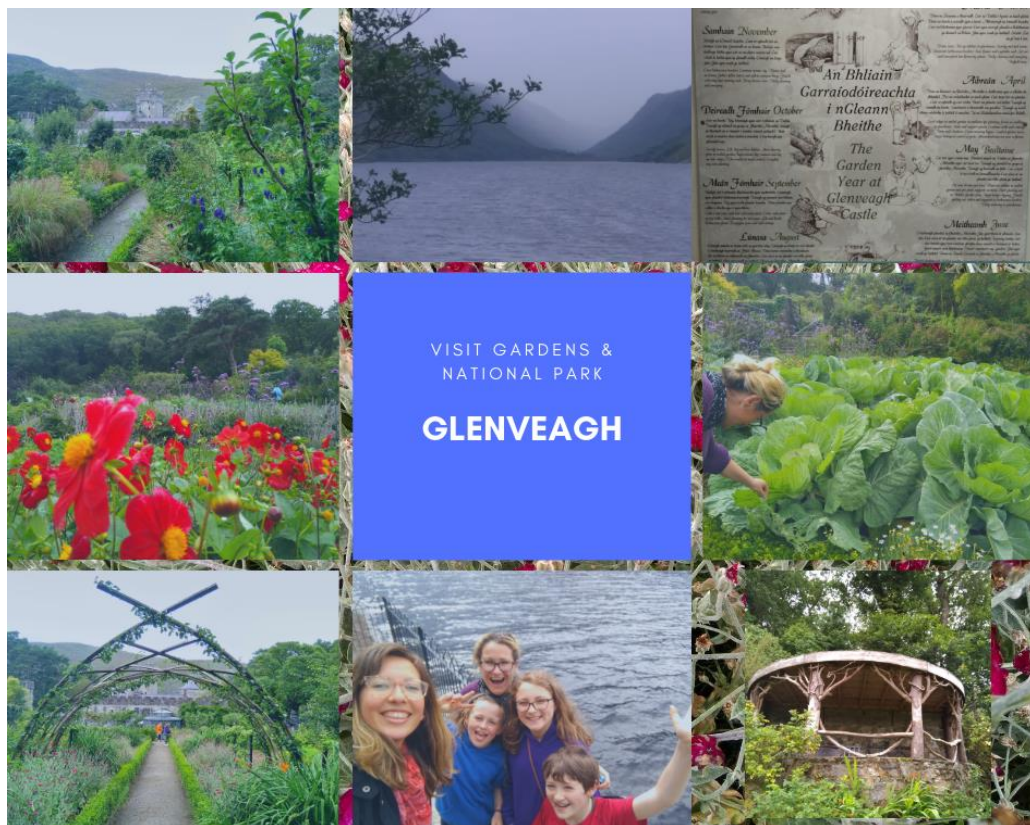
Joanne will deliver this workshop at St. Columb's Park House in Derry. LOVE FOOD HATE WASTE looks at the food we are eating and the choices we make. Joanne will be giving an overview of the global picture, how far our food travels and she will look at local solutions and how people can make a big difference by making a small change. As part of the workshop, participants will take away seeds for planting.

I contributed to the preparation of the talk by connecting the topics to the Sustainable Development Goals, like zero hunger (SDG2), responsible consumption and production (SDG12), climate action (SDG13) and life on land (SDG15). I also pointed out the importance of a local and short food supply chain and of becoming more resilient by growing your own food. The workshop will be conducted after my training.

# LOVE FOOD hate waste

## 3.12 Visiting Glenveagh Gardens and National Park:

Glenveagh is a designated special area of conservation and special protection area under EU and Irish Law. Its mission is to protect, interpret and manage the landscape under these regulations, whilst allowing visitor access and enjoyment for all. The Castle Gardens are regarded as one of Ireland's outstanding horticultural masterpieces. Their mission is to conserve and enhance the garden as an inspirational environment that cherishes and protects the biodiversity of the plant world. There are grown many rare plants, unique to Irish Gardens.





### 3.13 Electric Picnic festival - Global Green area:

As a part of my training, Joanne and I were part of the Community Gardens Ireland team, in the Global Green area of the Electric Picnic festival, Ireland's biggest music festival. Global Green is a colourful pop-up eco-village of green ideas, merriment, inspiration and action. For over a decade this area, coordinated by Cultivate, has been the conscious heartbeat of the Electric Picnic. Here you could find climate activists, artists, makers, musicians, foodies and poets from across Ireland hosting transformational ideas, activities and conversations for all generations. The District 13 area was the solar powered area for stalls, talks, activities and discussions on Global Goal 13 - Climate Action - highlighting climate responses, social justice, solidarity and engagement with the Global Goals. The Wasteland area was all about upcycling, recycling and zero-waste. 100 Field agents of change were engaging audiences in climate action.

At our Community Gardens Ireland stall, we hosted workshops like seed paper -and seed bomb making, a biodiversity walk and a no dig garden demonstration, hosted by Joanne. In the GROW tent we hosted several talks on seed saving, soil, permaculture, compost, the European GROW project and much more.

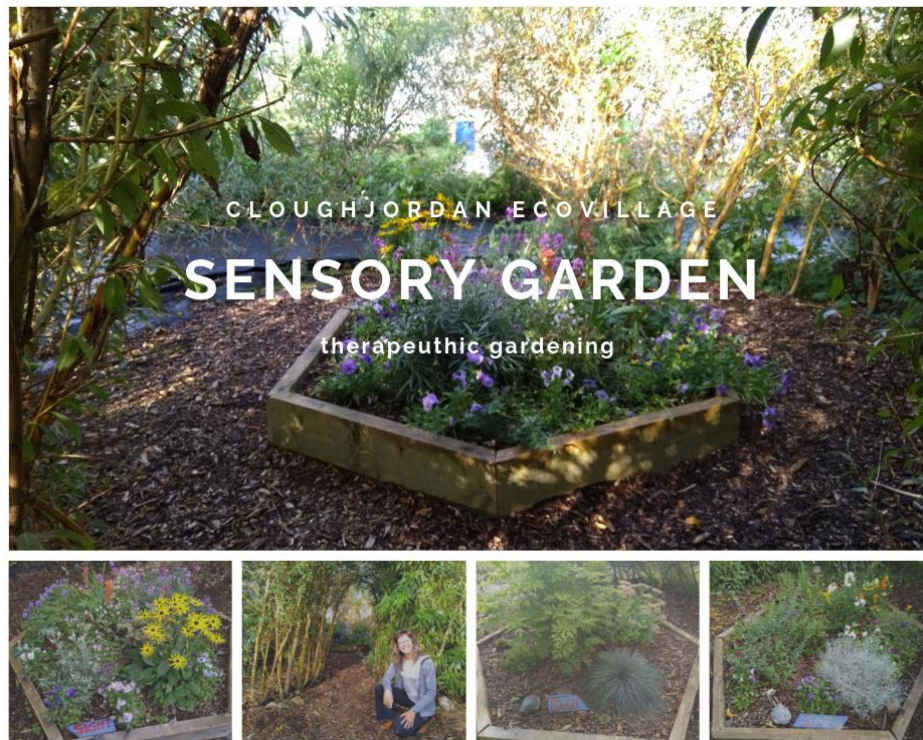
I really enjoyed working with the Community Gardens Ireland team on the festival, getting to know all those beautiful like-minded souls who are trying to reconnect people with nature and with each other. It made me realize again more than ever how important these connections are, not only for our planet but also for ourselves. I helped with the preparation, construction and set-up of the stall, with workshops and I also attended several panel discussions and talks.





### 3.14 Visit Sensory garden, CloughJordan ecovillage:

I ended my internship with a visit to the Sensory garden project in CloughJordan ecovillage. A bit more than one year ago, I volunteered on this project. Being a good example of therapeutic and social gardening, children with sensory problems can visit this garden and explore and help develop their senses. This garden, consists of 5 different raised beds, filled with flowers and plants related to the five different senses. I was curious to see how the project had been developed since last year, and was so pleased to see how beautiful it became. It has become a lovely, quiet space, benefitting mental health as well as local biodiversity.



## 4 Interviews

### 4.1 Interview with Dee Sewell



1. *Briefly introduce yourself - name, where you come from, where you are living at the moment, your educational background, your current profession.*

My name is Dee Sewell, I moved to the South East of Ireland in 1998 from the UK. In the UK I left school at 16 and started an apprenticeship as a secretary, I carried out this work as a PA/Secretary for 18 years. Following our move to Ireland, I became a stay at home Mum for ten years until our three children all reached school age. In 2008 I returned to college as a mature student to study a level 5 horticulture course. In 2009 I became self employed, creating an owner managed business to help people grow their own food - Greenside Up. This developed into workshops and then helping to create community gardens. In 2010 I became an Educational Training Board tutor in Carlow and Kilkenny, working with community groups. During the past nine years, I have studied Level 6 Train the Trainer, Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Horticulture specialising in Market Gardening, Level 7 Certificate in Transformational Community Education and I am now studying the Level 7 Certificate in Landscape Design. These days my work is falling more into social and therapeutic horticulture where I work with several socially inclusive groups in Carlow. In 2010 I became one of the founding members and Chair of Community Gardens Ireland, created to support community gardening in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

2. *What is your connection to OURganic Gardens?*

I met Joanne some years ago in the Organic Centre at a Community Gardens Ireland workshop in Leitrim. It was following this workshop that Joanne had the idea about creating OURganic Gardens. Joanne joined the committee and we have remained colleagues and friends ever since.

3. *What does "Sustainable Rural Development (SRD)" mean to you?*

It aims to improve the lives of people living rurally and underpins most of the work I do given that I live very rurally myself.

4. *Are you involved in any organisations linked to SRD? If so, which ones?*

No, though I do work with County Carlow Development Partnership as their horticulturalist, primarily under SICAP (Social Inclusion) and am on the email list for the National Rural Network, our local PPN and on the committee of Carlow Environmental Network and Carlow Social Enterprise Network.

5. *Are you involved on a professional level in SRD? If so, please explain how.*

See above.

6. *Which issues do you think are essential for the transition to a sustainable/regenerative future?*

So many! Rural transport has to be addressed, along with encouraging people to shop locally, buy from local farmers, use less chemicals, move away from fossil fuels, understand soil, understand and find the different organisations working to help rural (and urban) populations. The later in particular can be difficult to find. Networking and education, education, education!

#### 4.2 Interview with Taragh Cosgrove



1. *Briefly introduce yourself - name, where you come from, where you are living at the moment, your educational background, your current profession.*

Hi, my name is Taragh Cosgrove and I am from Dublin originally. I come from a family who are market gardeners. I am living in Foxford, County Mayo, West Ireland.



I have a degree in Fitness and Leisure Management and have recently changed careers to embrace Horticulture. I have several courses in Horticulture, Organic gardening and Wildflower Identification. This past year, I studied full time Horticulture level 6 and I have started working in Enniscoe Organic Garden in Mayo.

2. *What does "Sustainable Rural Development (SRD)" mean to you?*

In my opinion, Sustainable Rural Development means getting back to your roots. Growing your own food, reusing, upcycling and making and doing in a way that lessens your impact to the planet.

3. *Are you involved in any organisations linked to SRD? If so, which ones?*

Yes, I am a founding member of Foxford Community Garden where we hope to develop a growing area with community involvement. We aim to pass on knowledge to young people and to give produce to the community. I am also a founding member of a nature and fishing festival called Foxford Riverfest. I am as well connected with Mayo Organic Group, where I attend meetings and workshops.

4. *Are you involved on a professional level in SRD? If so, please explain how.*

No, apart from my employment with Enniscoe Organic Garden, I am not involved professionally in sustainable rural development.

5. *Which issues do you think are essential for the transition to a sustainable/regenerative future?*

I think making people more aware of the impact they have, of composting, reusing, and upcycling are essential for the transition to a sustainable future. Also involving young people in organic, chemical free gardening seems very important to me.

## 5 Assessment from a personal point of view

I chose OURganic gardens because I felt we are sharing a similar vision. When being there, I realised we not only shared a similar vision on sustainable rural development but I also saw several of my own project ideas implemented there or planned to be implemented there. I really enjoyed talking to and discussing with Joanne and other like-minded people I met during my stay, the many topics of sustainability. I am feeling very inspired and motivated to bring this experience, knowledge and inspiration back home and implementing it.

This training gave me more confidence, courage and empowerment in pursuing a professional career in sustainable development. It became clear to me that this really is the path I want to

follow in my professional life, even if it isn't always easy. I realised that starting my own project, is an ongoing learning process. Beginning with an initial business plan and project design, it will progress step by step and change with new insights. I learned that I don't need a perfect and 100 % plan to start with. On the way, it will evolve as new things will be learnt, new insights gained and new people contributing to the ongoing project.

My experience as a part of the Community Gardens Ireland team at Global Green - Electric Picnic festival also taught me several things. I learnt about social and therapeutic gardening from Dee Sewell of Greenside Up and chairperson of CGI. I heard so many stories and good practices from different community gardens all over Ireland. I saw also the role and impact of reconnecting people with nature and with each other in rural areas as well as in cities. Being a part of this amazing team with like-minded people, I realized more than ever how important these connections are, not only for our planet but also for ourselves, while striving for sustainable rural development and an inclusive and resilient future.

## 6 Lessons learnt

My internship with OURganic gardens made me feel more empowered to start my own project in the future. I have had the opportunity to experience an amazing local, social and sustainable project at every level. The fact that besides the internship activities, I was also living with Joanne and her family, this opportunity gave me a great insight of each aspect of this social enterprise/sustainable rural project. I learned about the positive aspects of this project, as well about the difficulties faced. I have got a clearer vision about the working, the organisational structure and the business plan of a social enterprise and I realise now that it is an ongoing and evolving process.

During the different projects we visited, the meetings and the events I attended and during the work in the garden, I realised the importance of building a local network, the connection within the local community and the key role volunteers play in social sustainable projects. This, is not only important for the publicity of a project and to "ease the work", but even more to raise awareness about sustainability and about the importance of local, organic and regenerative agriculture and horticulture. Eco-education is one of the key factors in this transition. It enables people to implement aspects in their daily life, to start their own vegetable garden, to (re)design their livelihood into a sustainable way and to become more resilient to the changes we are facing. OURganic gardens' walks and talks are great ways to enable this. Visitors learn about different approaches to sustainable rural development and about a sustainable lifestyle by discovering and experiencing it on site. They not only learn about growing their own vegetables and fruit but also about sustainable building techniques, water management, different composting systems, social enterprise etc. I enjoyed getting this holistic overview. Learning about the sewage system with Aquatron separator as primary treatment, the reed bed system as secondary treatment and the wetland system as tertiary treatment was very inspiring. I also learnt about the sustainable building techniques that were used in Joanne and Milo's house, about sustainable materials, do's and don'ts, the use of timber and hemp.

Moreover I learnt a lot about horticulture and different garden practices and techniques like the power of seaweed as an organic fertiliser, about no-dig gardening, the composting system and crop rotation. I could see the implementation of the different permaculture principles woven through the entire project.

I discovered several interesting books and authors and spent some time reading Joanne's inspiring eco-sustainable library. I will definitely continue reading some of these titles and

authors when back home. Knowing that Joanne taught herself a lot through reading and self-study, gave me the courage to keep on reading and learning through self-study. I am feeling more confident now that I will be able to manage well in the area of sustainable rural development and sustainability.

My experience as a part of the Community Gardens Ireland team at Global Green - Electric Picnic festival also taught me several things. I learned about social and therapeutic horticulture from Dee Sewell of Greenside Up and chairperson of CGI. I heard many stories and good practices from different community gardens all over Ireland. I also saw the role and impact of reconnecting people with nature and each other in rural areas as well as in cities. Being a part of this amazing team with like-minded people, I realized more than ever how important these connections are, not only for our planet but also for ourselves as we strive for sustainable rural development and an inclusive and resilient future.

## 7 Action Plan

At the moment I don't have my own property, but I will start making a notebook with different ideas, good practices, techniques and designs I hope to implement in my project.

The project I have in mind will be a combination of several aspects; educational, environmental and social. It will include a permaculture garden benefitting local biodiversity and with a resilient and regenerative character, a special area for social therapeutic gardening activities, a small venue where several educational workshops and lectures can be hosted as well as screening environmental documentaries. My aim is to develop a place where people can benefit from place-based learning, learning about a sustainable, regenerative and resilient lifestyle with respect for our planet. I would love to show people the importance and the power of the connection with nature and to show them positive examples of how we all can direct our lives towards a more sustainable lifestyle.

I am seeing all of the things below as the next achievable and realistic steps in my journey to my own future project.

Implementation of my own project ideas:

- Lifelong learning/new courses:  
Doing a "start-up business" course  
Researching / doing social and therapeutic gardening courses  
Read a lot about what I want to implement - Joanne learned a lot by reading and self-study.
- Getting involved in different associations as a volunteer in order to network within this field in the region I live in as well as gaining more experience in local networks and organisations.
- Keeping in mind the advice Joanne and other people I met during the training gave me, good practices I have seen during my internship, inspiring ideas and stories. During my training, I kept a learning journal and diary which I will be able to consult and expand when back home.