

Bringing Nature to Man's Domain

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Dolphin's Barn Community Garden

It was a cold, wet April evening when a small group of us gathered by the canal in order to [open the Dolphin's Barn Community Garden](#). It had been a dull day, and by the time we made our way into the garden, the full moon was hanging overhead. On the bank of the canal opposite the public library, close to the bridge at Dolphin's Barn, behind the walls of a factory, stood a disused area of grass. This area contained three billboards, 6,000 square metres of grass, and very little else.

At the recent [Grassroots Gathering](#) workshop it was decided to take over the space to plant trees and vegetables rather than to see it wasted. And so, on April 12th, in co-operation with a week-long ['tree walk'](#), through Dublin city, we made our way down the canal in the rain, armed with hazel trees to plant in our new garden.

Why are we doing this? Well, there are several of us involved, each for our own reasons, but I suppose the idea is centred around the two ideas of environment and community. The project is an attempt to address the lack of green spaces in our city. We are using the garden to grow food. We intend to engage with the local community. The garden is also a social space, giving us a chance to engage with other like-minded people. Some of us have a vision of an unbroken greenway through Dublin City, encompassing the two canals, the Botanic Gardens, and the Phoenix Park. The idea of the garden is not an original idea: there are community gardens in [Cork](#), and in [Belfast](#), and around the world. This garden fits into a bigger picture of community activists trying to improve the urban experience.

By the end of that first evening my socks were wet through and my trousers were filthy, but we had planted three hazel trees and two willow trees, and the community garden was underway. Now, three weeks later, we have planted another three hazels and some apple trees, and we have cleared a large space of earth, planting four rows of herbs, seeds, vegetables and flowers, including potatoes, garlic, onions, celery, parsley, rosemary, and fuchsia. We also made initial contact with the local community, survived a visit from the Garda (local Irish police), made several useful external contacts (including in the city council), and each of us has made new friends.

There are a number of us involved in the project, but the group has no formal structure. I certainly do not speak for the group; this is just a personal account of what I think is going on with the garden. One of the strengths of the project is that it is not reliant on any one person or small group of people. Each time at the garden there has been a different collection of people, usually including at least one new person, and there is always a different dynamic. We have a loose arrangement to meet at the garden every Thursday evening at 6.30pm, but, of course, anybody can go ahead and garden independently whenever they have a free evening. If you are interested in joining our mailing list just email the following address: dolphinsbarn-garden-subscribe@lists.riseup.net

Community

One of the central ideas behind the garden is the idea of community. In the modern world, the local community has been weakened. Because of longer working hours and commuting times, because of the time we spend watching television, and because people are more likely to rent and move from place to place, people are more likely to become isolated. People do not have the time to engage with their own communities. Similarly, in the activist community, it is easy to find yourself feeling isolated. It is easy to feel that there is a lack of like-minded people out there. This garden is an opportunity for Dublin people to come together in an effort to improve their city. It is a chance for people to show that they can work together, and can organise themselves and achieve something as a community.

Our garden will only be successful if we can get people to become involved and take ownership of the project. One way to do this is to make use of the public library to inform the local community. We have already made some initial contact with the locals. We drafted a letter outlining the basics of what we were doing, and went around to some of the local houses to meet the neighbours of the community garden. We received a mixed response. Some people were supportive, and others had concerns. But the important thing is that we have opened a dialogue with the local residents. A little further down the canal, a garden has already been established by local people three years ago, and is still going strong. This garden is an allotment-style garden, and is fully planted. This shows that there is a will among some of the people in the area for this kind of initiative. It also shows that a project like ours can succeed.

One example during the tree walk showed how initiatives such as this can engage people's enthusiasm. On April 14th, three trees were planted in a homeless centre named Maple House, in honour of a man named Billy Merrigan, who was tragically killed after being struck by a bus. John, Dermo, and Harry, three of Billy's friends, planted two birch trees and an ash tree as a shrine to Billy's memory. The lads recorded a [short audio clip](#) of a few words about the late Billy (1922-2005).

The Grassroots Gathering workshop for the community garden was facilitated by Dunk, and last week, Dunk was involved in work on another project: [a new garden for Dolphin House flats](#). This garden was started by Willie Morrogh, from the city council. A small plot of ground has been created, using sods of grass and train sleepers. It is situated on a bare patch of land beside a playground, and will contain plants and vegetables. Willie is also very supportive of the community garden. As well as Willie Morrogh, we made many valuable contacts during the [Convergence festival](#) at the [Cultivate Centre for Sustainable Living](#). There is no shortage of interest and support. There has even been talk of starting similar projects around the city, in East Wall and on the [Royal Canal](#). But there is always room for more assistance, so all are welcome to get involved.

Food

One of the peculiarities of the modern world is the change in our relationship with our food. Now that we 'eat out' so much, and now that it is so often a 'ready meal' when we do cook for ourselves, it seems that we may be losing our ability to prepare meals from a set of raw materials. And even when we do cook - with vegetables, for example - we have lost much of our connection with them. We do not know their background: how far they have travelled to get to our kitchen, how they are grown, whether they are genetically engineered or modified and whether they are treated with chemical pesticides. We also know very little about who grows them: how well they are paid, and how fairly they are treated. In the community garden we plan to grow our own food and re-establish a link with our food. We will tend our own food and know exactly where it comes from.

Conclusion

Other kinds of activism on their own can be frustrating. But the community garden is a form of direct action where you are in full control. There is none of the frustration of a large protest which is ignored by the powers that be, and none of the desperation of trying to change the system. Of course, these actions are also important, but, in addition to taking part in these events, proactive projects like the community garden give a sense of control and purpose which is not a reaction to any external events. We are making use of a space that would otherwise be wasted, and our success is dependent only on ourselves. But the garden is not just for its own sake - the goal is also to link people up and bring together a community with a set of shared goals. The physical nature of the garden means it is a grounding force for abstract ideas. It is a space for like-minded people to come together on a regular basis. And if you like the sound of that, you know where we are.



The Cursed Earth Garden (AKA The Phibsborough Community Garden)

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In February this year, a new community garden has opened in Phibsborough, on the banks of the Royal Canal. It started off with some trees and a herb garden, and is establishing itself as an alternative means of urban food production. This article is a reflection by one of the community gardeners on the reasons for the project.

I've been involved in the Phibsborough Community Garden (AKA The Cursed Earth Garden) since its inception. I wanted to get involved mainly as an opportunity to learn about growing my own food. I'm shamefully ignorant about small scale food production. Like everything else in our modern world, it is designated to specialists to increase efficiency. We spend 13 years in school being indoctrinated (longer if you're particularly slow) and trained to be cogs in the machine of industrial civilization, but unable to fend for ourselves in any basic way. Teaching myself how to grow some food is another small step towards self-empowerment and away from being totally dependent on the machinery of a globalized economy. I find it much easier to get involved in a project that concentrates on building a positive aspect of our ideals rather than trying to destroy a negative aspect of the dominant culture. Maybe it's just my cynicism that sees oppositional activities as frequently being akin to shouting at brick walls. Sometimes it's just easier to walk around the walls than try to knock them down.

The land itself is squatted. It appears to be a long disused part of the railway. We're not asking permission from a higher authority, we're taking it because we believe in the merits of our actions and the futility of requesting somebody else to improve our lives. It's all about doing things ourselves, learning, making mistakes, making friends and trying to improve our local area in some small way.

Our city is being held hostage by speculators who crowd our neighbourhoods with over-priced and shoddily built apartment blocks, with no investment in local facilities, green spaces, playgrounds, community centres, etc. The garden will probably be built over with one of these at some time in the not-too-distant future. If nothing else it might serve as a symbol of our society's principles when it gets bulldozed to make way for yet more gated apartment blocks.

Our environment in this country has been ravaged by the effects of thousands of years of civilization. We have killed all the native forests that used to blanket the island and turned the countryside into a chemically-green wasteland. We have lost the ability to provide for our needs from our local areas, and this coupled with an avaricious consumerism means we import more and more goods, both necessary and unnecessary, increasing the destruction worldwide.

The only sensible way of life is a sustainable one, everything else is by definition, doomed to failure sooner or later. Our lifestyle is so far removed from an idea of sustainability that it has become an absurdity. It's nigh on impossible to find Irish apples in Tesco in September.

I don't know if I particularly want the garden to become 'organized'. Currently it exists as a loose collection of friends and associates. I'd like to see it grow and change organically, with people coming and working on it at their own leisure, for the sake of it, for the enjoyment of walking away from the traffic and digging hands in dirt. It's self-empowering. It's practical. In economic terms it means I can grow a few vegetables, save a bit of money, work a little less and have more time to spend doing what I want to do with my time. In human terms I learn a little about how to look after myself, spend time with good friends doing something healthy and life-affirming, make new friends and get to see a piece of land damaged by industrialism get a new lease of life.



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