



# Growing a domestic-scale tree nursery in Wicklow

**Aidan J. ffrench**, CRANN member and urban forestry advocate, outlines a new project – a simple system for propagating and producing a diverse tree stock for sharing in communal spaces

Two years ago, I embarked on a small, slightly ambitious nursery project; growing modest numbers of native and non-native trees from seed and from whips/transplants in my suburban garden in Bray, Co Wicklow. An ongoing experimental initiative, it uses a garden patio (13.5 sq.m.) in an efficient manner, adopting best practices with a scientific approach. While not particularly innovative, it's the kind of creative project other CRANN members may find inspiring, even thought-provoking. I would welcome feedback from readers.

## Background and context

My life-long interest in trees has included periods representing the [Irish Landscape Institute](#) and [dlr \(Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown Co Council\)](#) on the [Tree Council of Ireland \(TCI\)](#), supporting its mission to foster a deeper tree culture

in Irish society. More recently, as project manager/lead author of [dlr's 10-year Urban Forestry Strategy, 'A Climate for Trees'](#) (2024-31), my colleagues and I composed an ethical philosophy, advocating for an authentic respect for all trees, seeing them as cognate 'Living Organisms' (see CRANN magazine 2024). It also draws on our Celtic ancestors' reverence for trees.

Adapted from [Greater Lyon's City Tree Charter \(France\)](#), the philosophy calls for a conscious lifestyle lived in "co-habitation with trees". Living that relationship in practical ways informs my professional advocacy, activism and consultancy. That translates into the 'hows and whys' of growing and planting trees in urban landscapes, where almost 66% of Irish people now live and work. Taking account of the biological and other needs of trees at all stages is foundational to co-habitation.

## Approach

The exemplary work of the Native Woodland Trust (NWT) informed the development of my nursery. Its own nursery at Annamoe, Co Wicklow documents, stores, sows and propagates a diverse tree stock for planting in NWT forests.

The production system applies best plant husbandry practices – bio-security, provenance, growing media and data management. Simplifying and adopting that approach for my domestic setting, I employ a learning 'on-the-tree job' modus operandi.

Learning resources include YouTube instructional videos, technical webinars and publications. Among the most useful titles have been *Our Trees: A Guide to Growing Native Trees* (TCI. Millennium 2000), and *Tree Grower's Guide – Starting Community Tree Nurseries* (U.K Tree Council. 2022).

Continued on page 24



Continued from page 23

### What to grow – avoiding 'natives absolutism' and 'lolly-pops'

The sometimes contentious, adversarial debate about natives versus non-natives is an unnecessary distraction but can't be ignored. **It must be informed by** recent and ongoing scientific research. My approach might be called 'leafy-ecumenism'; countering the seemingly fundamentalist zealotry that promotes a 'natives only tree-ology', often espoused by well-intentioned, but misinformed amateurs.

By being scientifically 'tree-mindful', we can address the needs for more diversity in tree form, species, varieties and beauty. In May and October 2023, respectively, I attended two significant conferences – the European Forum on Urban Forestry (EFUF) in Krakow and the World Urban Forestry Forum (Washington DC), where tree diversity, resilience and equity were the key topics.

**Emerging evidence-based research** is clear: 'ecumenical' practices that are truly inclusive, prudent and forward-looking require critical thinking.

In European cities, research on urban trees' resilience to climate change impacts is discovering that **some native species** are struggling; and that non-native species can be better-equipped to withstand impacts (e.g. increasing heat, extreme storms and droughts).

Recognising this, some Irish practitioners are adapting their decision-making on tree selection; for example, Dublin City Council's and dlr's Parks and Landscape Services roadside and public realm schemes include *Gleditsia triacanthos*, evergreen magnolias, and *Ginkgo biloba*.

We also need to diversify our specification of tree form to include more natural form such as multi-stems. Given the ubiquitous planting of standards, unsurprisingly, the public often perceive 'lolly-pop' trees as the only, the usual way trees are planted, especially by councils. However, as we know, trees don't naturally grow as 'lolly-pop' form; it's an artificial mechanised system, sometimes necessary for certain design and management reasons (e.g. spatial constraints in street verges).

So, running in parallel with growing-from-seed, I developed a simple system of growing larger specimens, multi-stemmed and feathered specimens in air-pots.



### Seed collection, stratification and germination

I use a range of seed sources of local provenance, from veteran and mature specimens across sites in south Co Dublin and north Wicklow. These include Marley Park (Rathfarnham), Knocksink Nature Reserve (Enniskerry), Sidmorton Park and Kilruddery estate (Bray), Ashford village and Newtownmountkennedy.

Mostly native species, seeds were collected from pedunculate and hybrid oaks (*Quercus*), hazel (*Corylus*) and mountain ash (*Sorbus aucuparia*); while non-natives include Turkey oak (*Quercus cerris*), sweet chestnut (*Castanea sativa*) and horse chestnut (*Aesculus*).

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*hippocastanum*). Quality control focused on healthy, undamaged and larger seeds. Viability checking used the common 'float test', an indicative rule-of-thumb.

Stratification was by way of fridge storage in sealed zip-lock plastic bags containing site-sourced leaf-litter, humus, augmented with horticultural sand and commercial compost. My main species, oak has a typical rate of 85-90% 'chitting' or germination prior to initial potting.

### Containers and potting-on

I've used four-inch plastic containers recycled from garden centre purchases, alongside one-litre tetra packs, and coffee cups; and root-trainers that I normally use for peas. Trainers and 20cms tetra packs are ideal for oak, providing a long, compact container that encourages fibrous-root-development. Seedlings are then transferred to air-pots.

Air pots are the optimal solution for the final phase prior to planting (I also tried five-litre florist's rose buckets). I procured two types of air-pots (three-litre square and five-litre round pots) online from a horticultural supplier in Czechia. Air-pots have distinct advantages, and are ideal for domestic-scale and community nurseries: space efficiency, well-developed fibrous



Seed collection: Oak acorns and European beech in leaf-litter. A CRANN bag is a very handy item to have in your kit!

root-balls, seasonal flexibility and ease of transplanting to final positions. They are readily re-useable in the production cycle.

### Growing-on whips and transplants

I set aside a smaller area for a selection of mostly non-native species to be grown to advanced and multi-stemmed specimens as feather or special amenity trees. These are usually sourced from Van der Wel Ltd, Aughrim, Co Wicklow – a reputable and long-established family nursery business, providing a diverse range of trees of excellent quality.

Typically, I buy whips and transplants (45-75cms) as field-grown, bare-rooted stock, usually lifted in late-October or early-November. I am trialling four lesser-known, lesser-grown species – Japanese cedar/redwood (*Cryptomeria japonica*), dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*), and tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), aware that the last three perform well in the Irish urban environment.

### Sharing and distribution

So, whence all this effort?

The overall aim is to give away trees and promote Irish tree culture, especially

in and with local communities and individuals. I emphasise tree's roles in urban placemaking: **the beauty of local** neighbourhoods, climate adaptation, biodiversity and encouraging our respectful co-habitation with these awesome living organisms.

To date, I have supplied oak trees to Wesley College, Ballinteer, Co Dublin where the science teacher expressed a strong interest in teaching students about trees. In the near future, I will offer trees to schools and communities, especially in disadvantaged areas where there is evident social inequity in tree cover, across south Dublin and north Wicklow.

I hope to collaborate with Bray Tidy Towns, in identifying suitable planting sites in the town, mapping potential tree planting opportunities, using digital methods, and photography. Decision-making will be guided by the mantra *Right Tree – Right Place – Right Reasons – Rightly (correctly) Planted*.

### Scaling-up: Community Tree Nurseries

Long term, I will explore the feasibility of establishing an urban community tree nursery as a co-design, co-production with prospective partners. There's a burgeoning

tree activism by Irish citizens and eNGOs, whether in tidy towns groups, residence associations, other community groups and allotment gardeners. Though I detect a deficiency in attention to urban environments, with much of the State's focus and media coverage set on 'rewilding and nature restoration' exclusively in **rural landscapes**. I suggest that is an imbalance that CRANN and other NGOs might address.

Conceivably, the emergence of community tree nurseries would reduce the reliance of community groups on Coillte and commercial tree nurseries. In addition, it would reduce the cost of tree planting for such groups, while also increasing the species diversity.

Community tree nurseries are well-advanced, socially-beneficial initiatives in the UK; the Fellowship Of The Forest established the Community Tree Nursery Collaborative (CTNC) in 2021. We can learn much from their practical experience and methodologies.

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