

A warrior fighting for bluebells... in Bluebell

How one gardener is moving the earth to make a suburb live up to its name

By Eugene Higgins

This is a tale of high drama, a real gardening 'whodunnit' of the sort you don't hear too often in my trade. The hero of the piece is Fiann Ó Nualláin, a garden installation artist who creates gardens of 'cultural value', and the story involves his journey towards a project called 'Bluebells for Bluebell'.

For the past three years, Fiann has been nurturing a scheme to plant thousands of bluebells on a grass verge near the Luas stop in the Dublin suburb of Bluebell.

I went to visit him at the site at the Bluebell headstone adjacent to the Luas stop that faces Our Lady of the Wayside Church.

So, he's bringing bluebells back to 'their' habitat? Not exactly. The area actually derives its name from a long-gone pub called the Bluebell, and not the plant. Now, it is a busy suburb served by the red Luas line, which has a run of 'colourful' stops close to Bluebell: Goldenbridge, Blackhorse and Red Cow.

Planting a verge full of bluebells in front of the sign for Bluebell is not just an installation. It is also a regeneration project aimed at involving local youngsters in maintaining their community, thus giving them 'ownership', as he calls it.

Fiann, whose name suitably means noble warrior, is exercised by something doubly symbolic.

When you go to a garden centre and pick up some bluebells, you are more likely than not buying Spanish bluebells or *hyacinthoides hispanica*. Therein lies the problem: native species are once again being replaced by blow-ins that are easy to propagate. *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* is the species name of our native bluebell. Unlike the straight up flower you see in gardens, the native version's flowers curve downwards on the same side of the stalk.

Fiann says: 'Landscapes really can resonate spiritual and cultural values and have the capacity to affirm or transform. The bluebell project is a part of this. I've been collecting bluebell seeds since 2006 and building a stock with the view that Bluebell with no bluebells could be changed and become a repository for the now endangered native Bluebells, becoming a land art piece with a message.'

'The notion of local kids growing



the bluebells and taking ownership of their common ground spoke loudly to me as I needed to communicate a message of hope through horticulture.'

He adds: 'All my gardens have a narrative, I want to try and help get rid of the thug drug culture, give communities other identities and encourage kids to have a voice within the community because they can have ownership by gardening it.'

Fiann is a passionate man who lives his work and the words he speaks. An activist in the true sense of the word, he has drawn attention through previous installations with titles such as 'Resistance is Everything', which featured in Bloom in '07.

'I want to get young children and teenagers involved,' he says. 'To give them ownership of the projects for now and for the next generation. My motive is that I respect our botanic wealth and Irish flora, and our native Bluebells are part of that. They are in danger, so hopefully this will create a focal point.'

From my own experience, I can confirm that the native species is under severe threat. Most garden



FLOWER POWER: Fiann Ó Nualláin, left, with Eugene at the headstone near where he planted native Bluebells, inset left, not Spanish ones, inset below

centres will look at you sideways if you request indigenous bluebells. However, while I complain about this, I am guilty of doing nothing about it, unlike Fiann. Activist that he is, he wrote to Dublin City Council and the Railway Procurement Agency (RPA) for permission to develop the project.

Both parties loved the idea. The community, of course, were right behind it. The RPA even gave €3,000 to kick-start the project which would enable the planting of 2,000 bluebells on the site.

Fiann had the stocks from his garden in Crumlin. So, with the ground-work done, all that was left was to plant the bulbs on the grass verge and, once established, to have a bluebell festival creating a cultural event in the process. Eventually, the goal was to put Bluebell on the map as an example of urban renewal. With the project about to come to fruition, local anticipation was high.

The villain of the piece emerged last Easter as the bluebells started into flower. Health and safety had not

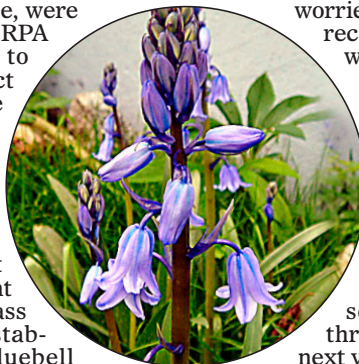
allowed for the area to be sectioned off and this would be a key to the 'whodunnit'. The offender was an ill-informed person with a lawnmower who decapitated the bulbs with Cromwellian efficiency, leaving not one standing and Fiann and his team speechless.

Of all of the scenarios they had worried about, they did not reckon on a lawnmower wreaking such havoc.

Thankfully, however, the RPA is poised to come on board again with a community arts grant and a biodiversity plan for the area based on the bluebells for Bluebell concept when the second Luas line through the area starts next year.

While a massive setback, the bluebell massacre actually raised awareness of the project and reconfirmed the council's support.

'When the bluebells were mown down it was a massive shock,' says Fiann. 'I had to cancel an official launch by Minister Éamon Ó Cuív but, in the end, it helped galvanise the



Don't forget... things to do this week

- If you've some seed packets that have been in the greenhouse for a while, check out if they're still good by sprinkling a few on a damp piece of kitchen towel. Keep them in a warm place and, if they're still good, they will germinate after a week or so.

- Mint is a great favourite of mine and not just as a herb. I enjoy its lovely blue flower, but it is important to control it by planting it in a pot or container as its roots can grow up to 5m underground.

- Rather than killing nettles, a small amount should be managed as they are a home for predators like ladybirds and hoverflies that will eat the likes of greenflies. They're also rich in nitrogen, and can be converted into liquid fertiliser. Fill a container with nettle cuttings and rainwater and leave for a month. Then dilute it in water, 10 parts to one and apply to the roots of your plants.

- A client recently needed an instant impact hanging basket, so I used bacopas, a super white summer trailing plant. They cost €4.95 each and, using four in each basket, they looked great. Don't forget that white is the last colour you see in the garden as night falls, so place them where they can be seen.

community and now there is even more support.'

Ingrid Heller, a local resident, says: 'The kids were so disappointed after they had helped with the planting but, in the end, it's going to be gorgeous for everyone to enjoy.'

Thankfully, after all this drama, some support has come forward but Fiann is still looking for sponsors to get the best out of his dream of bringing life to Dublin suburbs.

'My next plan is to plant native cherry trees in Cherrywood,' he says. 'I am still propagating bluebells and native ferns to populate the woodland that will accompany the bluebells.'

I for one have complete faith in Fiann's abilities and have a marvellous vision of a bluebell woodland in a few years lighting up the rather abandoned grass verge where one would never guess that such a gardening drama took place.

www.eugenehiggins.ie or email eugene@colourgreen.ie



PLATED: Neven Maguire

Chef Neven prepares dish of the day

Celebrity chef Neven Maguire is used to preparing a dish of the day but he's gone one step further by becoming the new ambassador for Belleek Living tableware.

The 150-year-old pottery firm first made its mark with porcelain figurines and Parian ware. However, both



giftware ranges. Visit www.belleek.ie for details.

fell out of favour in recent decades and so, the company has produced a fresh and contemporary delft and cutlery range.

Helping out is Cavan man Neven, who will assist the design team – advising on pieces for the oven, tableware and

At €159, the Simplehuman Deluxe Recycling Bin could be expected to reincarnate rubbish as gold bullion. Instead, it offers a 'fingerprint-proof coating'. Stockists include Howards Storage World in Carrickmines, Co. Dublin, who also sell stackable Eco Plastic Bins at €12.95 and €15.05 for the more budget conscious.

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