

# IRISH SEED SAVERS Association



**WINTER 2023**  
edition

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*Front Cover:*

*A Robin resting on an Irish heritage apple tree in Peadar’s Orchard, ISSA.*



## News from Capparoe

Our work at the Irish Seed Savers Association (ISSA) is situated at the intersection of agriculture, ecology (hence our practice of agroecology), botany, horticulture and plant genetics. The overarching and unifying element of our work is conservation both of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, and of the environment in which we grow. Working with the land and nature we must respond, adapt and change to the conditions we find ourselves faced with. In 2024 we are launching our new strategy. The strategy is essentially our 'guiding star' together with a map that considers where we have been, where we are now, where we are going to and how we will get there. Developing the strategy considered ISSA in its entirety (mission, vision, values) in the wider context of the external environment that we operate in. And when it comes to the external environment, one thing is for sure - we are certainly living in interesting times.

It is an inescapable and betimes overwhelming fact that climate change, biodiversity loss and the crisis within our food systems are a

serious challenge to us all on a global basis. At ISSA we are confronted by these realities: the changing climate has given us extremes of weather, with unseasonable winter warmth and deluges in the spring and summer followed by periods of drought- all with inevitable impacts on our crops. In April-May we found ourselves having to irrigate our bare root apple trees nightly with water drawn from Lough Derg - an unheard of phenomenon in the rainy West of Ireland and an additional chore for our already hard-working staff. A preeminent climate-scientist friend assures me that irrigation is going to be a future necessity for growing crops.

We know too that the changing climate is leading to phenological mismatch, where plants and their pollinators are adapting differently to the new conditions in terms of their life cycles: insects and their food source, plants and their pollinators are falling out of synch with one another. Plants flowering unseasonably earlier may go unpollinated, with consequences for our food crops, while insects lacking their normal seasonal



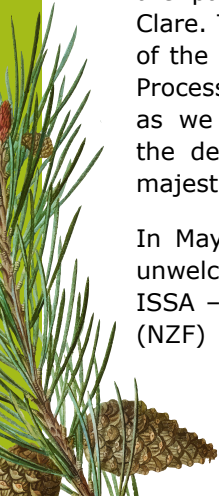
forage contributes to the collapse of pollinator populations and the loss of biodiversity. We work to mitigate this effect by managing our farm for wildlife, specifically pollinators, leaving wild areas wherever we can, and creating habitats such as the log hives all over our site, that have been happily colonised by native Irish honey bees, *Apis mellifera mellifera*.

A little understood phenomenon we are having to face is how the changing climate, together with barrier-free trade, has facilitated the spread of invasive species- organisms that typically cause ecological harm in a new environment where they are not native. The list of invasive species in Ireland is growing longer. The National Biodiversity Data Centre estimates that there are currently 1280 non-native species in Ireland with 13% or 167 of them invasive and harmful to our environment. Most of us are now familiar with the impacts of Ash Dieback – skeletal trees where once stood the graceful green shade of our native Ash – we are particularly badly hit in East Clare. The news earlier in the year of the arrival in Ireland of the Oak Processionary Moth sends shudders as we are forced to contemplate the decimation of another of our majestic trees.

In May of this year, we found an unwelcome visitor on our site at ISSA – the New Zealand Flatworm (NZF) – prevalent throughout the

country, but bad news for us, as while the NZF is neither a threat to our trees or seeds, its feeds on the indigenous earthworm population greatly reducing their numbers.

The most likely source of introduction of the NZF to our site was the planting of trees from a nursery that we now know to be contaminated by NZF. In fact, this is the most common source of spread throughout the country. Nursery owners keep shtum as they do not want to damage their trade or incur stock losses. We cannot be part of this environmental recklessness, as a conservation organisation, we cannot under any circumstance be responsible for the secondary spread of an invasive species. Having immediately reported our discovery through the correct channels (Dept. of Agriculture and the National Parks and Wildlife Service) we set up a task force that included international experts on NZF and other invasive species and have been working committedly to develop a biosecurity strategy to deal with the present threat and future risks and an action plan to remove any risk of secondary contamination. We quarantined a crop of 1600 bare root trees that we were growing on site as a precaution. Despite there being no evidence of these trees being contaminated, we were not prepared to take any risks. In the meantime we have conducted a thorough assessment of our farm and instituted a rigorous phytosanitary regime to prevent



cross contamination onsite, and secondary contamination offsite. Our standards and initiative in handling the situation have been complimented as 'exemplary' by the authorities. This experience has been a wake-up call, forcing us to understand the risks and to take biosecurity very seriously.

With the loss of genetic diversity within food crop varieties nationally and globally, and the increased vulnerability of our food systems, which in turn threatens food security, the work of ISSA is vitally important. Saving plant genetic resources- seed and trees – means saving them from extinction. Once gone, they are gone forever.

As keepers of the National Heritage Apple Tree Collection, and holding Ireland's genetic resources for food and agriculture in our Heritage Seed Bank, we have a weighty responsibility. Safeguarding these precious genetic resources for future generations means working to the highest quality standards while identifying and managing the associated risks. The long-term maintenance and use of crop diversity depends upon secure conservation of the seed and heritage fruit trees. We at ISSA take our responsibility in the guardianship of Ireland's food crop heritage, very seriously.



*Elaine Bradley*

**Elaine Bradley**  
Executive Director





## Ted Cook shares glimpses of Andrew St. Ledger

Irish Seed Savers Association are deeply saddened by the passing of our friend Andrew St. Ledger. Andrew was a passionate advocate for Ireland's native woodland and the wider environment and was co-founder of The Irish Woodland League, an NGO dedicated to restoring the relationship between people and their native woodlands in Ireland. He was a native woodland specialist for guided walks and talks, workshops and presentations and creator/author of "Know Your Native Trees" education modules.

As a member of CELT (Centre for Environmental Living and Training), Andrew was biodiversity officer and basic woodland skills course designer, and represented CELT in the Environmental Pillar. Andrew was also a talented artist, wood sculptor and bespoke furniture maker, utilising the beauty of natural wood.

Ted Cook, Heritage Specialist and friend of Andrew for many years, shares glimpses of his times with Andrew in the following paragraphs:



*Andrew leading a walk in Cahermurphy Woods with a Wild Routes Ireland group*

We remember Andrew St. Ledger as master woodturner; co-founder of The Woodland League – foremost because he lived purposefully, decently, humbly but loudly. 56,000 people vested their trust in Andrew when joining The Woodland League online petition, sharing their details – his was a trustworthy ‘brand’ in this ‘age of show biz’.

When Andrew first landed on my doorstep 25 years ago, our very first conversation concerned the pre-historic forest scripture (Ogham) – there by the wicker casket (woven in 22 hours by fellow Woodland League member Pete Beaumont with assistants) shone out in its boldest inscription, the Ogham transcription for ‘Andreas’, inscribed on the willow woven lid; a cycle concluded.

Before proceeding, lets share a glimpse of Andrew’s profound esoteric knowledge of Ireland’s last shreds of natural woodland; while building his log cabin in Glendree townland (Glen of the Druid’s), Andrew lived in a caravan. A pine marten had built her nest under his bed – a woodland species so very recently depicted as ‘vermin’ and shot almost to extinction, and a healthy litter of young.

The previous year Andrew and author (with Pete Beaumont and Dick Warner) attended the 28th Burren Wildlife Symposium

in Fanore, West Clare. John D. McNamara, local sheep farmer and expert on all things pine marten led us on a six hour foray to observe this ‘wild being’ feeding and preening at several of John D’s feeding platforms in his hazel wood’s. From John and Dick we learnt that ‘martes martes’ is our most elusive and shy of our native woodland fauna. Odours aside, Andrew shared (daily progress reports by text) his sense of privilege.

Authors diary for last days of October 2003 – St. Ledger and I hike from Bantry to Glenruan (Gleann Rún – Glen of Secrets), northface of Sheep’s Head – camping in a few acres of Atlantic sessile oak on the Atlantic’s edge. The next morning, before a campfire breakfast at ‘Dan Hummell’s’ stone cabin, we spotted a basking shark and Andrew’s first response was to strip skinny and swim out to the shark, circa 70 meters offshore – where for an hour the fin surfaced within meters of our accomplished swimmer, accompanying Andrew back to near-shore.

Avoiding roads for four days, we hiked by the mountain ridges to the lighthouse at the peninsulas tip – camping in ringforts and drawing water from remote wells (one of them I recalled as ‘Well of the Poets’).





The accompanying picture dates from 2006 – a 'Hedgerow Field Survey' at Irish Seed Savers, jointly hosted by Andrew and author, both

of whom were co-opted onto the 'Heritage in School's' panel – our theme – agroforestry, shelterbelts and hedgerows.

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# Irish Seed Savers Association Host the 12th European Forum of EC-LLD

Irish Seed Savers Association (ISSA) was honoured to host the 12th European Forum of the European Coordination of Let's Liberate Diversity (EC-LLD) at Trinity College Dublin from October 26th to 28th, 2023. The European

Coordination Let's Liberate Diversity (EC-LLD) is an international nonprofit organization dedicated to bringing back diversity in the food system through the dynamic management of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.



*Participants of the EC-LLD! 12th Forum at Trinity College Dublin*





*Field Trip to Mud Community Island Community Garden, Dublin*

The Coordination boasts a robust network of 20 members with a network of 170 national organizations operating across 19 European countries with a membership base exceeding 35,000. In collaboration with approximately 15,000 farmers, EC-LLD actively engage in the conservation and management of around 40,000 plant varieties. This renowned forum brings together on an annual basis, hundreds of farmers, seed associations/companies, NGOs, and concerned citizens to engage in discussions on agricultural biodiversity and to promote actions aimed at restoring diversity in food and seed systems.

Inaugurated by Pippa Hackett, Minister for State, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and taking place over three days, the forum offered a unique opportunity for participants to come together, share ideas, and collectively explore the vital theme of cultivated diversity and dynamic seed management.

Elaine Bradley, Executive Director at Irish Seed Savers Association says;

'In a time of climate crisis with all the implications for our food systems, this event presented a unique opportunity to bring together some of the key actors

across Europe working towards sustainable food systems based on open pollinated seed - it is vital that this is more than just a conference – but a starting point for us to come together and find real solutions to the challenges to our food security that the climate crises represents’.

The forum plenary session ‘Seed and the Future of Food’ keynote address was given by Dr Paula Bramel (Chair of Irish Seed Savers Association, Conservation Consultant and formerly Deputy Director of Crop Trust) with panellists Michael Miklis (Founding Member of Irish Seed Savers Association) and Madeleine McKeever (Founder, Brown Envelope Seeds). The diverse conference programme was filled with engaging social events, enlightening workshops,

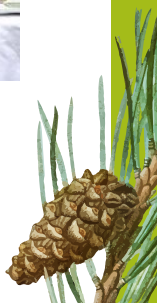
participatory activities, and field visits, that included Mud Island Community Garden, the National Botanic Gardens and The Liberties Weavers Walking Tour.

The forum’s collaborative spirit, along with its diverse participant base, fostered an ideal setting for individuals and organisations to unite, exchange knowledge, and take actions towards a future where diversity isn’t only celebrated but also managed and utilised in a sustainable way to benefit us all.

As avid cultivators and guardians of genetic diversity, the staff from Irish Seed Savers in attendance at the forum eagerly participated in the EC-LLD workshops, where they not only contributed their expertise but also gleaned invaluable insights



*Members of Irish Seed Savers Team at the EC-LLD 12th Forum; from left to right, Micheal Miklis, Gillian Lattimore, Gemma Sidney, Sorcha Sheehy Williams, Elaine Bradley, Jennifer Walsh, Ollie Moore (ARC2020).*



that promise to shape the future of sustainable agriculture in Ireland and beyond. The following section of this article delves into the immersive experience of the Irish Seed Savers team, shedding light on the impact of their participation in the EC-LLD conference workshops.

Sorcha Sheehy Williams, ISSA Garden Team, participated in three workshops; 'No Patents on Seeds - Workshop with Irish policy makers on seeds patents', 'Diverse Approaches to Diversity: From Market-Driven to Needs-Based and Farmer-Led Breeding' and 'Seed harvesting, drying and storage: basic aspects for improving and maintaining vegetable seed quality'. Some highlights of these workshops are outlined by Sorcha as follows:

The 'No Patents on Seeds' workshop outlined the current laws on patents that affect seeds in Ireland and across the EU. I learnt a few interesting and worrying things here. One, that patents could be granted to a technical process that produced plants with a certain trait. This means that a patent-holder can have exclusive rights over a plant which exhibits that trait, as well as the fruits and seed of the plant itself. Also interesting is that the patent-holders are mostly large international corporations - Bayer-Monsanto alone controls around 30% of seed markets internationally. The workshop



hosts, Fulya and Katherine, did a great job in explaining the often confusing legal jargon around patent law, as well as pointing us to resources, such as [no-patents-on-seeds.org](http://no-patents-on-seeds.org), where campaigners are raising awareness on these topics. Also at this workshop, Maurice Deasy spoke about his own experiences working as a tillage farmer and brewer, and practicing regenerative agricultural methods.

At the 'Diverse Approaches to Diversity' workshop, the hosts talked about their experiences in growing and breeding varieties of crops that were novel and nutritious, and/or especially adapted and integrated with the environments they were growing in. Robin showed pictures of the multi-coloured wheats they have growing and spoke about the benefits of a variety of blue wheat for the presence of anthocyanins, despite the difficulty in marketing such new crops to customers. Holly and Kevin spoke about landrace



gardening – the development of new varieties by mixing a diverse blend of parent plants, with seed saved from crops that are especially pest/disease-resistant and have appealing characteristics.

They spoke inspiringly of breeding out undesirable traits over a number of generations, and the importance of working with community (such as supporting local growers) when it comes to developing secure food systems.

The third workshop, *'Seed harvesting, drying and storage: basic aspects for improving and maintaining vegetable seed quality'* was all about best practices when it comes to seed harvest and storage. The aim here is always to promote seed longevity, i.e., the length of time a seed remains viable. Two things were especially of interest to me as a seed grower. One is the importance of harvesting seed once it has finished its late maturation

stage. During this time the seed dries as much as it can on the plant, and may begin to fall away. Until this point, during the 'early maturation' or 'seed filling' stage, the seed may look as though it is ready but in fact will not have developed enough of the vigour characteristics to remain viable for a long time. The second interesting point is that when it comes to storage, the presence of oxygen has a detrimental effect on the long term viability of seed. This we know at ISSA, and our conservation seed packets are vacuum foil-packeted as they need to remain viable for decades rather than just years. Other fascinating practices were mentioned as ways of removing oxygen, such as using the CO<sub>2</sub>-heavy fumes of compost, or placing a candle in a container which goes out once the oxygen has been exhausted.

All in all, it was a fascinating forum, with much learned and many connections with other growers



made. I'll be looking forward to next year!

Jennifer Walsh, ISSA Retail Co-ordinator, participated in the 'EU proposal for deregulation of new-GMOs: content and implications for Farmers, Consumers, and the Seed Sector' workshop. Jennifer outlines the key points taken from this workshop below:

Attending the workshop on the EU proposal for the deregulation of GMOs or NGT (new genomic

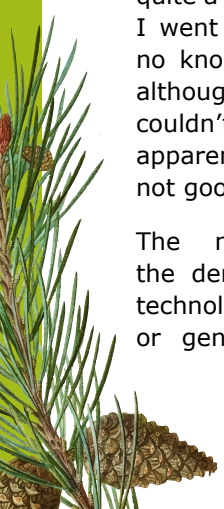
splits GM plants into two categories, Category 1 has a loose description meaning the majority (around 94%) of plants fit into this category, while Category 2 is any plant that doesn't fit into Category 1.

Plants that fall into Category 1 require no risk assessments for human and animal health or the environment. There will be no traceability for these plants through the agricultural and food supply chains. No GMO labelling for consumers and no way for farmers to know if neighbouring crops are GM which means risk of cross contamination with no way to know. A complete lack of traceability and labelling means there is no way to monitor any health or environmental effects. There is also no liability established, so it is unclear who would be legally responsible if anything went wrong (such as a consumer having an allergic reaction). It would be difficult if not impossible to ensure complete separation between organics and GM crop plantations, and cross contamination is inevitable.

Category 2 does require some risk assessments, but these will be determined by the expected risk profile. This is effectively useless, because risks by their nature are often unexpected. Current law states that all GMOs have certain basic tests to ensure consumer safety. Current labelling and traceability requirements will still apply. However, as we have seen,

technologies), was eye opening and quite a scary topic, to say the least. I went into the talk with virtually no knowledge on the subject and although there were elements I couldn't fully grasp, it was very apparent that the new legislation is not good news.

The new legislation proposes the deregulation of any new GM technologies such as gene editing or gene silencing. The proposal



the vast majority of crops fall into Category 1 where traceability is impossible and labels are exempt.

All GMO plants will be patented as well as the technologies used to create them. The producers are usually large agrochemical companies who then legally own the plant variety and anything that it may cross with. This is a huge issue for farmers and organic growers, as they have no way of controlling or knowing when these GM crops cross pollinate and are then liable for the possession and cultivation of GM crops.

As you can see there are a lot of risks involved for consumers if this legislation passes. A complete lack of labelling means we can no longer make the choice to buy GMO or non-GMO foods, and a lack of research means there are no assurances that food safety risks have been checked. There is also a huge risk to farmers and the future of all organic farming as we know it. Very scary stuff!

If you would like to oppose this legislation you should write your MEP with your views. There is lots more detail online than what I have outlined above, and I would urge you to read more into it. To keep up to date you can follow GMWatch on Twitter or visit their website where you can subscribe to their newsletter at [www.gmwatch.org](http://www.gmwatch.org).

For those interested, a publication reviewing the forum workshops will be published by EC-LLD in due course at [www.liberatediversity.org](http://www.liberatediversity.org).

Irish Seed Savers Association would like to extend our gratitude and thanks to Minister for State Pippa Hackett, Councillor Caroline Conroy, Maurice Deasy, Micheal Miklis, Paula Bramel, Donal McCormack (Community Gardens Ireland), Maria Young (Cork Food Policy Council and Green Spaces for Health), Samantha Costello (Trinity College Dublin), Ollie Moore (ARC2020), Gourmet Food Parlour Catering, Maeve Forman at Mud Island Community Garden, Marja Almquist at The Liberties Weavers and all the speakers and participants for their valuable contribution to the 12th EC-LLD Forum.





## Linen in the Liberties

The Liberties Weavers is a voluntary organisation based in Dublin. Our mission is to ensure that the textile heritage of the Liberties is not forgotten by revitalising the craft locally and making the history and the skills of weaving accessible.

We were founded in 2020 and we have begun to realise our aims. We run weaving classes (in person and online), host exhibitions and talks, and network with other groups and organisations throughout Ireland. Our timing for beginning on this journey could not have been better, as there is an evident and growing interest in Ireland in sustainable textiles and heritage crafts. We feel that we are part of a growing community of textile enthusiasts and environmentalists who want to delve into our rich textile heritage in the hope of learning about the potential we have in Ireland today to inspire a move to a sustainable textile industry and healthy communities.

We aim to be a nurturing and supportive group, so when Covid-19 restrictions were forcing us apart we were looking for creative ways to stay connected – and that is when Linen in the Liberties began.



*A gorgeous handwoven piece representing three years of work, fun and experimentation by some of The Liberties Weavers growing flax.*

The idea was inspired by a project that originated in Sweden in 2018. It started as a local project, and it was named 2m2. Packets of flax seed, enough to plant two square meters were distributed throughout the locality. The idea quickly caught on across the country, and the result has been a nationwide resurgence of interest and appreciation of flax and linen. Old flax processing equipment has been dug out of many barns and charity shops.

The Liberties Weavers, being an inner-city project, had very few options for space to grow even 2m2



of flax. It is estimated that there is 1m<sup>2</sup> of green space for every citizen of Dublin 8.

However, we are fortunate in that one of our local community gardens, Flanagan's Field in Rialto, gave us a plot to cultivate. We also provided flax seed to people at home, and several micro crops were grown



in pots and yards. Thus began our completely novice attempts to grow and process linen.

Our first challenge was to find seed, preferably a heritage variety that would have been sown in Ireland in the past, when we were famous for the quality of our linen products. Being a long-time supporter of Irish Seed Savers, I approached them and learned that there are two categories of flax seed, one destined for oil and the other for

fibre. Fortunately, we discovered that other groups were beginning to take an interest in flax. After a trip to Headford, Co. Galway, we discovered that they were growing the variety Northern Princess. We bought our seed from Irish Seed Savers our first year, but since then we have been saving seed from the original crop.

One thing that has surprised me about the Linen in the Liberties project, is the number of people who got in touch with us and told us of their childhood memories of the smell of retting ponds and bringing flax to market. This reminds us that flax was grown commercially in Ireland well in to the 20th century.

The earliest archaeological evidence of large scale flax production in Ireland has been found in the 7th century Cahergall Ringfort in Co Kerry. Wearing fine linen was a mark of distinction in the medieval period, but internationally Ireland was famed for its wool. In order to diminish the threat that this quality material posed to English production the English parliament brought in the Irish Wool Act in the late 17th century. This prohibited the export of wool fibre and cloth from Ireland. The Act caused a collapse of our wool industry and resulted in hardship throughout the country.

Parliament then made the decision to encourage the growing and processing of flax in Ireland instead. Not only was the Irish climate suitable for flax, landed estates could devote



acreage to flax crops, and there was a large supply of people who could undertake the intensive processing of flax at low wages. The 18th century became the glory days of Ireland's highly organised domestic linen production, with cultivation all across the country. However, gradually during the late 18th and early 19th centuries machines were invented that mechanised flax processing and weaving. Ulster entrepreneurs were able to invest, and as flax production moved from homes to factories, it was Ulster that became synonymous with fine linen during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Industrialisation also brought a period of cheap cotton to European markets. Linen was going out of fashion. However, the industry survived as the fibre has many other uses. For instance, the 'skins' of both the first Ford Model T and the Spitfire fighter aircraft were made from flax composites. Sadly, it also enjoyed a revival in both World War 1 and World War 2 as the material of choice for dressing wounds. This was because it produces less lint (fluff) than cotton, and thus prevents infections.

This summer, one of our members visited the Mallon Flax farm in Co. Tyrone where they are reclaiming

the family tradition of larger scale flax growing and processing. We were delighted when he brought some of their excellent, long and fine fibres back to Dublin. A pleasure to spin, but maybe not as satisfying as growing our own!

To be honest, our agricultural skills are at beginner level and we were not prepared for dealing with drought, rain, foxes, mice, cats and other challenges. We had to improvise our processing equipment; dog combs, shoe horns, nails and bits of wood were all repurposed as flax breakers, hecklers and combs. After three years we have even managed to produce enough thread to weave a table runner that incorporates bits of flax from all our various micro growers.

It will be a long time until we produce enough to weave a shirt, but all involved have developed a love of the fibre and a greater appreciation and respect for all textiles.

I recommend you get some flax seed from Irish Seed Savers next spring, have a go yourself and join the new flax wave.

You can find out more about The Liberties Weavers on [www.thelibertiesweavers.ie](http://www.thelibertiesweavers.ie), or follow us on Instagram and Facebook.

**By Marja Almqvist**

The Liberties Weavers



# Reintroducing the ‘Oldamster wierdeboon’ to its place of origin ?

At the time of writing this article, Autumn is in full swing, which means I can start autumn sowing and planting for next year! Besides sweet peas, garlic and spring bulbs, I’m really excited to be starting the ‘Oldamster wierdeboon’, a broad bean originally from the province of Groningen in the Netherlands. With help of the Irish Seed Savers Association, I’m reintroducing this special bean in Groningen.



*Sanne Meijer - historian, author and entrepreneur. She works on all kinds of projects regarding Groningen history, heritage and culture.*

My name is Sanne Meijer and I live in Roodeschool, a village in the province of Groningen in the north of the Netherlands. In the beginning of this year, I decided to reserve a part of my allotment for a ‘Groningen Garden’ (in our local dialect: ‘Grunnegs Toentje’). Here, on 16 m<sup>2</sup>, I planned to fuse my two loves: the history of Groningen and gardening.

## **Grunnegs Toentje**

First and foremost, I needed to know if there were even such things as Groningen crops – i.e., cultivars or other plant species that are originally from the Groningen area and/or are grown and maintained solely in Groningen. So, I visited archives and libraries and dove into old cookery books, garden plans and crop-manuals. And yes, I discovered multiple Groningen varieties of beans, peas, broad beans and cabbages. Some have disappeared long ago, but some varieties are still found at specialist heirloom seed companies and at seed-saving organizations. In the end, I decided to grow ten different Groningen vegetable varieties.

A few seeds were surprisingly easy to find – just in our local garden centre – such as ‘Groninger’ brussels sprouts. Others were definitely harder to come by, for example ‘Vroege Groninger’ pointed cabbage, which is only available via the Dutch Centre for Genetic Resources (CGN). Normally, the CGN only provides certified farmers and education institutes with these special seeds. But since I wanted to publish about my ‘Grunnegs Toentje’ and it already received much media attention before I even started, the CGN considered my



efforts educational and therefore kindly sent me some seeds.

## **History and future**

Being a historian, I'm curious to research the meaning of these regional heritage varieties in a cultural-historical context. What can these vegetables tell us about our regional history? What did Groningen people used to grow, eat and preserve? But apart from these historical questions, the future is equally important, as I consider how we might get these old varieties back on the market and on our dinner plates. Being a vegetarian, I find I consume quite a lot of bean-based products. However, these beans are grown mainly in Southern Europe, Africa or South-America. Can't we make beanburgers, falafel and hummus from Groningen beans?

Although my 'Grunnegs Toentje' started as a hobby project, to my surprise, it gained much attention in both regional and national media. I now not only write about my Groningen Garden, I also have a recurring segment in a regional TV-show, I give tours for the public and find myself participating in many more garden-related projects. All in all, a lovely, albeit slightly unexpected success.

## **Mollebonen**

One of the vegetables I grew in the 2023 growing season, were 'mollebonen'. At least, that it was it said on the seed packet



which I purchased from Tuinen van Weldadigheid, a lovely Dutch company specialising in heritage varieties. But the thing is, that 'mollebonen' is not actually a cultivar. Mollebonen are, in fact, roasted and salted broad beans (*vicia faba*). They are considered a regional delicatessen and a typical Groningen snack, not to be found anywhere else in the Netherlands. In reality, you either hate them or you love them. I, fortunately, belong to the latter group. They are specially tied to Groningen city, as its inhabitants are mockingly called 'mollebonen' since there used to be many mollebonen-roasting companies around. Not anymore though – the last roaster closed its doors in the 1970s. You can now only find them prepackaged in tourist shops, sometimes produced in China.

A 'molleboon' is therefore a dish rather than a type of broad bean, receiving its name 'molleboon' only after the broad bean is roasted and salted. Traditionally, 'mollebonen'

until germination, then dried and then roasted in the oven." In another well-known Groningen dictionary, the one by K. ter Laan in 1929, it's stated that the broad beans might also be roasted in a wok. The word 'mollebonen', he poses, is referring to a 'molle': an iron pan in which 'paardenbonen' can be roasted. There is a persistent story in Groningen that 'mollebonen' originate in the former Dutch East Indies. And true, 'mollebonen' do resemble certain South-East Asian snacks made with salted beans. Yet there are remarkable differences and some historical objections to this theory. If 'mollebonen' do have their origins in the former colonies, then why did they only find their way to Groningen and not to the rest of the Netherlands?



are made from different types of broad beans, such as the 'Walse boon' and the 'paardenboon', which are more like field beans. The seeds in the package of 'mollebonen' which I bought and planted, were actually those of a 'paardenboon'. They grew and produced prolifically, with both white and purplish flowers, and I was able to get into the kitchen and make many 'mollebonen' myself.

I roasted them in the oven, as the roasters in Groningen city used to do. They were usually bakers, doing the roasting job on the side as they had their ovens already burning. In a Groningen dictionary from 1887, I found 'mollebonen' described as: "paardenboonen which are soaked



That's not to say the rest of the Netherlands didn't used to know 'mollebonen'. In a 1947 greengrocer's advert in a newspaper published in the middle of the Netherlands, we read: "Real Groningen Mollebonen, as big as nuts, as tasty as peanuts. Freshly roasted. 0.25 ct per 200 grams." Now, almost threequarters of century later, I don't think 'mollebonen' are as well-known in the rest of the Netherlands anymore.

Even in Groningen you can't easily find them in the supermarkets, as they have been replaced by peanuts, crisps and other salty snacks.

### ***Oldamster wierdeboon***

As I was reading up on the types of broad beans traditionally used for 'mollebonen', I repeatedly found mention of the 'Oldamster wierdeboon', sometimes called 'Oldambster wierdeboon' or, 'Oldambtster wierdeboon'. Although it might still be grown by some individuals – I can't say for sure – I could not find seeds anywhere, except for the aforementioned Dutch Centre for Genetic Resources (CGN). The only information in the CGN database, is that the 'Oldambster wierdeboon' is a land race. This means that it is not a cultivar. Instead, it's an often traditional variety that has developed over time, having adapted to its natural and (agri) cultural environment. This sparked

my interest, but as I couldn't find much more information, I decided to look into it another time.

Fast-forward a couple of months. The 'paardenbonen' have been harvested and made into 'mollebonen', the garden is doing its thing and I'm enjoying my yearly holiday in my beloved Ireland. There, I find some beautiful seed companies such as Brown Envelope Seeds and I gladly take some seed packages home with me. Once back home in Roodeschool, I browse the web for more Irish seed organizations, and this is how I find the Irish Seed Savers Association (ISSA). As I casually browse through their webshop, you can imagine my utter surprise as I find the 'Oldamster Wierdeboon'. I decide to contact ISSA, and receive a wonderful reply by seedbank manager Deirdre Morrissey. She kindly sends me four packages of seeds, along with lots of helpful information and even some pictures.



ISSA obtained the 'Oldamster Wierdeboon' in 2005 or 2006 through a seed swap with the Heritage Seed Library UK. I discovered the plants have unusual pure white flowers which apparently smell wonderful, with medium pods growing up the whole stem. They are supposed to be very frost hardy, which means I can Autumn-sow them. They are capable of self-pollination, though cross-pollination through insects occurs readily.



*Oldamster broadbean growing at  
Irish Seed Savers*

Interestingly, I'm not the first Groninger to show interest in the 'Oldamster Wierdeboon'. A while back, the seeds were grown by Jurgen Wegter from KVANN (Norwegian Seed Saving Organisation). He is originally from Groningen and mentions that he has also not been able to find

anyone in the Netherlands with this bean. Wegter also argues that it's probably quite an old type of broad bean, but that little is known of its origins.

## **Origins**

The name of the broad bean seems to suggest it originates from the 'Oldambt'-area, which is in the east of Groningen. This area is known for its fertile soil, which has been reclaimed from the sea. On a weblog about healthy foods, we read: "In Groningen, the [Oldamster wierde] beans are dried by lying on the sea clay soil. This unique drying method gives the broad bean its unique taste, colour and texture." Unfortunately, the writer provides no sources to back up this claim.

In the 19th century, the 'Champagne years' made grain farmers in the Oldambt-region the wealthiest of the Netherlands. During those years, farms were renovated like castles and these impressive buildings are still visible today. On the flipside, poverty among farmworkers was widespread and severe. No wonder that new political movements such as anarchism, socialism and communism became very popular here. Today, it's still an agricultural region characterized by large, widespread fields of mainly wheat, barley, rapeseed and potatoes.

Let's look at the other part of the name. A 'wierde' is an artificial hill, made around two thousand years ago to provide a dry place at high





*Oldambt region, the Netherlands*

tide. Such man-made mounts occur along the entire coast of the Wadden Sea, and Groningen is no exception. However, in the Oldambt-area there are but a few wierden. Most of them lie in the northeastern part. So, whether the Oldamster wierdeboon is actually from this specific area, we can only guess.

Regardless, I will start sowing the first broad beans this October – and another batch in Spring. I'm so excited to reintroduce the Oldamster wierdeboon to Groningen, and I hope many more people will follow my example. I will definitely save

seed and distribute it amongst other interested gardeners in the region. Of course, in the meantime, I'll keep Irish Seed Savers posted on the progress!

If you'd like to know more about my 'Grunnegs Toentje' (Groningen Garden), please see [www.sannemeijeronderweg.nl](http://www.sannemeijeronderweg.nl) or follow me on Facebook or Instagram @sannemeijerthuis. It'll be in Dutch though!

Want to know more, share information or swap seeds? Please contact me via [sanne.meijer@live.nl](mailto:sanne.meijer@live.nl).

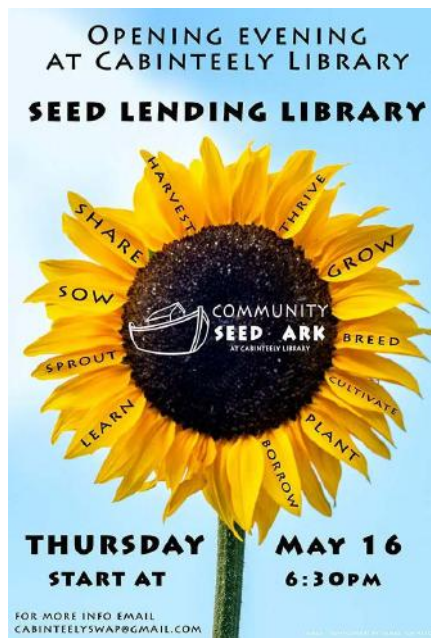
**by Sanne Meijer**

# Community Seed Ark at Wicklow County Council Library Service

In the Autumn of 2018, while working as a Library Assistant in Cabinteely Library a gardener working locally approached me to ask if the library would be interested in collaborating on a seed collection. This was how I first met Aga whose encyclopaedic knowledge of plants, and passion about environmentalism, food security and gardening inspired her to organise this seed library. Aga Kowalska is a third generation seed saver; the practice was passed down to her through the women in her family. Seed saving in Aga's family first took root with her grandmother in Poland after the second world war. Although I have very little knowledge of gardening, I was more than happy when my Executive Librarian Anne Millane, and Culture Librarian Susan Lynch in Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Library HQ gave us the green light to go ahead. Cabinteely Library staff could take care of the administration, and Aga was on hand to source and catalogue seeds, and answer any and all questions about gardening.

The Seed Ark at Cabinteely Library was launched in May 2019. Inspired by Mary Reynolds' We Are The Ark movement, environmentalism was reflected in every aspect of the project - from the recycled seed envelopes to the reuse of every

possible item - silica gel packets were collected to help dry seeds, old camera film tubs were used to house them, and everything arrived to the library on the back of Aga's bike. We secured permission from Cabinteely House and Gardens to collect seeds from their wildflower meadow, and held seed-gathering walks for the public, as well as our own expeditions on Thursday evenings to fill the Ark with seeds. Workshops proved very popular, and the Seed Ark flourished. This was the first seed lending system in a public library in Ireland.





In late February 2020, I moved to Bray Library as Librarian and had little time to settle in before everything changed quite suddenly. By mid-March, Covid-19 had shut the libraries and Wicklow County Libraries' staff were dispatched to Arklow to answer the phones for the community call helplines - connecting volunteers with cocooning community members to organise grocery shopping. After a few months, citizens in need had made direct contact with the volunteers assisting them, and we returned to our libraries to work in shifts on stock management projects, social media, online events, and book buying.

Sporadically over the next number of months we would be open for collection only, or for quick browsing, or not at all. By mid-2020, it was clear that nothing was going to change back soon and we set about finding new ways the library could connect with our local community. We held book clubs and visible mending workshops over zoom, and gave books out at the door when restrictions allowed. I contacted Aga to see if she was interested in setting up another Seed Ark, this time in Bray. We began on National Heritage Week with online seed gathering workshops, keen to embed the practice locally before the Seed Ark began. The workshops were very popular, zoom problems aside, and we were confident there would be enough demand in Bray to begin our own Community Seed Ark.

Our first seed list was sent out in Spring 2021, and the staff in Bray Library delivered seeds throughout the town by bicycle, and on foot. Quickly we made contact with local people who were already practising seed savers, and contactless deliveries of donated everlasting sweet peas, sunflowers and more began arriving. We contacted our local community groups, as we were searching for partners to grow and donate seeds to keep the Ark in supply. Local artist, Elida Maiques is involved with Edible Bray, and visited during the months that we reopened to introduce herself and let us know about her related artistic project- I Am A Forest.



Demand for seeds in Bray Library was high, and Wicklow Libraries headquarters were very keen to expand the project county-wide, another first for Aga's project. As the project expanded, events conspired against us and Aga returned to Poland to live. The Seed Ark was without a curator-gardener, and we had an enormous pile of unpackaged seeds to organise. I dug out Elida's email address and got in touch to see if she was interested in becoming our curator. Thankfully, she was interested, and quickly arrived on her bicycle to see what seeds we had stashed in our cupboard under the stairs. This was the beginning of a wonderful new direction for the Ark. Elida has been with us for over a year now, and the Seed Ark collection is shifting and changing to reflect her. As demand increased, a member of our local Tidy Towns fortuitously became a staff member in Bray Library and took over the day-to-day running of the Ark. Pauline Duffy is now the backbone of the Wicklow Libraries

Seed Ark, linking it in with Tidy Towns, sharing her knowledge (of which she is far too modest) and getting seeds to people around Wicklow County in no time at all. This spring, we began a new partnership with local garden and charity Festina Lente, who will be supporting the Seed Ark by growing and harvesting seeds for us to keep our collection sustainable and diminish our financial outlay. We greatly look forward to joint events, and developing our services together over the next couple of years.

We have been delighted to hear from colleagues in Arklow Library who have used the Seed Ark to step up a weekly sustainable planting event "Sow Seeds", where they show children and adults how to make newspaper pots, and milk carton window boxes into which they then put compost and seeds from the Seed Ark - and so everyone leaves with something to grow.



We have also heard from Librarians further afield in Kildare, Cork City and beyond who are setting up their own seed libraries - there is a very real sense of collaboration and excitement between these gardening librarians, who see seed lending as a natural development for their library branch. Our Seed Ark community has expanded manifold following my initial collaboration with Aga - in Wicklow we have strong links now with our Tidy Towns groups, Edible Bray and Festina Lente at an organisational level, but we also provide seeds to residential care homes around the county, as well as preschools, national schools and even the roof garden taken care of by the chef in our County Buildings. We still purchase seeds each year to populate the collection but our volume of donations is steadily increasing as our community becomes skilled at the practice. Late summer 2023 has been particularly abundant with donations of seeds, and other gifts from local gardeners.

**By Vita Coleman,**  
Librarian, Bray Public Library



To borrow seeds from our Wicklow Libraries Community Seed Ark, just email your local branch. They will be back in touch with a seed list, from which you can choose your top six or eight, and then Pauline will send whichever four seed packets are available. The Seed Ark is free to use, we just ask that you leave the plants in the ground long enough to allow the seed heads to mature, and dry. Then gather what you can, and return a few packets to keep the circle going. Borrow, grow, save, share.





# National Federation of Group Water Schemes 'Orchards for Farmers' Initiative

'Orchards for Farmers' is a scheme being run by the National Federation of Group Water Schemes and will see the provision of apple orchards to 230 farming families in four different counties. These apple orchards have been proudly supplied by Irish Seed Savers.

The apple trees are a symbol of the links between the protection of drinking water sources, sustainable land management and biodiversity. As part of the initiative, each family is planning to manage their orchards in a pesticide-free manner, given the risks of 'weed killer' to both drinking water and biodiversity.

This has proved to be a fantastic collaboration where families can grow and maintain Irish Heritage Apple Orchards, whilst being educated on the importance of correct water management on their farms, and reducing the risk of contaminated water run-off.

The community event that launched the initiative took place at the Four Mile House Community Centre. Broadcaster and member of the Tree Council of Ireland,

Éanna Ní Lamhna, was the guest of honour at the launch, which featured educational talks, baking demonstrations and an outside radio broadcast by a Shannonside Northern Sound FM. The day also included training for farmers on best practices to protect water quality in their GWS catchments.

Irish Seed Savers were pleased to be in attendance of this event, where we spoke about Orchard Management, Biodiversity and the importance of pollinators.

Some 80 farming families in Mid Roscommon Group Water Scheme and 10 families in Corracreigh Group Water Scheme were among the first orchard recipients. They will join 140 families across counties Mayo, Cavan and Monaghan in planting heritage apple orchards, with plans for a wider future roll-out across other group water schemes around the county. The initiative, which has been developed by the National Federation of Group Water Schemes (NFGWS) as part of a Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine funded source protection project, seeks to educate communities





*Gerard Hannon (Roscommon County Council), Noel Carroll (Mid Roscommon Group Water Scheme) Kirsty Phillips, Mark Farrelly and Seán Corrigan (all National Federation of Group Water Schemes) promoting the new 'Orchards for Farmers' initiative.*

about the need to protect water while also giving families something actionable that they can experience together.

The orchards have significant co-benefits for biodiversity, carbon sequestration and, of course, the possibility of some tasty, apple-based treats!

Welcoming the launch of the initiative, Barry Deane, CEO of the NFGWS explained its importance:

'Pesticide usage in gardens, on verges outside households, and on the farm can pose a threat to drinking water quality and to biodiversity in general. When communities understand this, they can play a vital role in mitigating this risk. An important element of this project is

our collaborative approach with the Teagasc Agricultural Sustainability Support and Advisory Programme (ASSAP), who we will be working with on a programme to educate the farming community on alternative controls to unwanted vegetation.'

Barry has highlighted the partnership approach of the Group Water Scheme sector with local authorities:

'We have worked closely with Roscommon County Council and the local community regarding source protection for a number of years now. This initiative is one of many aimed at the farming community and the wider community too. Safe drinking water is everyone's responsibility.'

Noel Carroll, Manager of the Mid Roscommon Group Water Scheme added:

'We take sustainability, water quality and biodiversity seriously on all our projects, and we are thrilled to be a part of this. It's a fantastic idea that will make a big impact in our community. We are delighted with all of the support that we have received at a local and national level, and with the interest from the farming and wider community, as well as community groups from all over the country. We have a fantastic line-up at our opening event and even have the Roscommon Drama Group producing an innovative video to promote the initiative.'

The promotional video is available to view on the National Federation of Group Water Schemes social media channels and website at [www.nfgws.ie](http://www.nfgws.ie)

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# 2-Year Seed 2 Seed Training Course

The Art and Science of Growing  
and Saving Seed



Now in its 14th year, the Irish Seed Savers Association will be commencing its 2-year Seed to Seed Course in March 2024. This in-depth course is aimed at those who wish to grow for seed to the highest standards. Graduates of the course are entitled to become Seed Guardians for Irish Seed Savers. The course is modular with teaching taking place on site at our organic farm at Capparoe, Co. Clare.

**For more details and to register your interest, contact  
Jennifer Walsh or Deirdre Woodhouse at 061 921866.**

# Event Days 2024

at Irish Seed Savers Association

**Join us for a year filled with open days and exciting events that celebrate nature, community, the art of seed saving and Ireland's agricultural heritage.**



## **Annual Community Seed Share Event**

*February 24th*

Kick off the year with our Annual Community Seed Share Event on Saturday February 24th! Dive into the world of seeds, swap stories with fellow enthusiasts, and take home a piece of biodiversity for your own garden. Together, let's sow the seeds of community and sustainable living.

## **National Biodiversity Week**

*May*

In May, join us for National Biodiversity Week to enjoy free guided tours of our heritage orchards and gardens, where our knowledgeable guides will showcase the rich biodiversity of Ireland and the importance of protecting it for future generations.

## **National Heritage Week**

*August*

Celebrate Ireland's rich heritage with us during National Heritage Week in August! Immerse yourself in themed events that showcase the deep-rooted traditions and stories embedded in our orchards and gardens. From ancient wisdom to modern conservation, there's something for everyone to explore.

## Tastes of the Orchards Tours

*September 10th to 15th*

As autumn approaches, join us for Tastes of the Orchards Tours in September. Indulge your senses in the flavours of our orchards, sampling the finest fruits and savouring the essence of Ireland's diverse apple varieties. Let the orchards enchant your taste buds and inspire your culinary adventures!

**Mark Your Calendar and Cultivate Connections at  
Irish Seed Savers!**

Visit our website for more updates and information:  
**[www.irishseedsavers.ie](http://www.irishseedsavers.ie)**



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Irish Seed Savers Association are very grateful to:

- Pobal
- The Department of Agriculture Food and the Marine
- The Department of Rural and Community Development
- The Irish Environmental Network
- Clare County Council
- The Heritage Council



**Thank you** for your valued support of our organization.



An Roinn Talmhaíochta,  
Bia agus Mara  
Department of Agriculture,  
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