



Annual Report

2020

A Message from our Chairperson

Over the past year the Organic Centre has shown determination, imagination and agility in delivering on its mission of encouraging the development of organic gardening and of promoting awareness of the environment. The pandemic has impacted in a myriad of ways on our health, and on our social and working lives. It has, however, also resulted in a greater appreciation of the importance of the natural world around us and has encouraged people to actively engage in gardening and healthy food production. Like many other social enterprises, the Organic Centre has been obliged to restrict aspects of its service to the public and to develop new and innovative ways of encouraging, skilling and equipping people in organic and environmental matters. The staff and volunteers at the Centre have risen to this challenge with energy and creativity.

The success of the Organic Centre in continuing its work and in ensuring its own sustainability during tough times has only been possible with the continued backing of our funders and with the loyal support of our friends and, importantly, our customers. It is important that we acknowledge that the Organic Centre depends for its survival on both funding and income from commercial activity. While the pandemic was the main challenge over 2020, the Organic Centre was also preparing for the impact of Brexit. In particular, supply chains for seeds and other products have been examined and reconfigured.

We are confident that the lessons learned, and that the skills and adjustments that have been developed over 2020 will ensure that the Organic Centre can successfully deliver on its mission into the future.

On behalf of the voluntary board of directors I would like to publicly express our appreciation of the extraordinary efforts made by the Centre's staff, volunteers, and supporters in enabling the Centre to survive the challenges of 2020.

Thank you all!
Gearóid Mac Eochaidh



A Message from our Manager

2020 was a tough year for everyone and here at The Organic Centre we worked hard to make sure that we were able to continue to support individuals, families and communities. Like so many other organisations/businesses the whole year was about thinking on our feet, negotiating new challenges and changes, and working hard to keep things on track and keep everyone safe. With weekend courses cancelled for the main part, we set to work using Facebook and social media to a much greater degree and created films and FB live sessions in the hope that this would go some way to filling the gap.

Our full time course was also moved online. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the students who stayed the course, and hope that whilst you did not get exactly what you came for, you stick with organic growing and keep in touch with us. Everyone here appreciates your commitment and your ability to adapt and make the best of what was a tricky situation. My hat goes off to you all, thank you.

The shop remained open for most of the year and though there were changes in the shop team, we kept up to speed with orders, introducing a delivery service and going out into communities to ensure that everyone could grow their own. The Shop team were extremely busy during the first lockdown and we saw an increase in online sales that supported our work for the whole of 2020. So thank you to everyone that supported us via shopping, donations, volunteering and funding.

In terms of funding, a big thank you to Pobal, MSLETB, IEN, Piste Solidaires, Léargas, LEADER, Fáilte Ireland and Leitrim County Council.

Looking forward, we know that 2021 will bring its own challenges, particularly as we continue our Covid fight and Brexit begins to hit home. We are hopeful that we will meet these head on and keep on adapting.

Sincerely,
Jan Melia



The Gardens

Community Garden

The community garden started again in early March and had two sessions before it had to be suspended due to Covid 19 restrictions. We recommenced again in July and ran until late October. We had 12 members this year including 5 very welcome new members. We expanded the activities of the community garden this year to include seed saving, composting, propagation and tree planting. Looking to 2021, we hope to increase membership numbers and further expand the community garden activities

Transplants

The transplants department was hit hard by Covid restrictions this year. The Sligo market was suspended from March to June, which is a big outlet for plant sales. We reduced the amount of plants grown in comparison to other years but kept up the volumes of our most popular plants, tomatoes and salad trays.



The Imithe Project

The Organic Centre registered with the Imithe Project in January of this year. It is a nationwide project where selected gardens are chosen to grow a selection of native wildflower seeds with the intention of building up a seed bank. A bed in polytunnel 2 was chosen to grow the plants and so far we have saved 7g of seed. 7g of seed is the equivalent of 42,000 thyme seeds or enough to sow nearly 5 square metres of ground with wildflowers. We plan to dedicate an area of the garden each year to growing these wildflowers and keep the seed saving project a priority for years to come.



The Tunnels

The transformation of **tunnel 7** into a perennial tunnel continued with planting 30 more lavender plants and planting apricot and peach trees. All these plants will contribute to propagating our own plants for sale. Next year we will continue to diversify the range of plants grown in the gardens and increase our efforts to save seed from both vegetables and herbs.

Tunnel 8 was again the community garden tunnel. We experimented further with green manures. We under-sowed the squash and tomato crops with red clover and yellow trefoil respectively. We found this helped to a large extent with weed suppression and moisture retention.

The introduction of mushroom compost in the gardens was a worthwhile experiment. Using the compost as a mulch instead of digging it into the soil resulted in relatively weed free beds throughout most of the year and the beds with mushroom compost as the main fertilizer gave superior crops of brassicas and tomatoes.

Also planned next year is a 'Tomato Day' event. In the garden we will grow 21 different varieties of tomato and display them on the day. The tomatoes will be grown in tunnels 1, 6 & 7.



Events

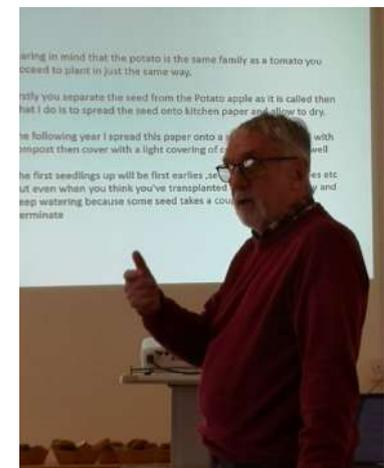
The Organic Centre hosted **Potato Day 2020** on Sunday March 8th before the lockdown. We were joined by guest speakers including expert David Langford, with demonstrations from the Loy Association of Ireland, children's workshops with our friends from Green Shoots. Plus, all things potato were on the menu from Finn and Albie of the **Grass Roof café**.



LEFT: Local Glenfarne man Frank Mc Dermott giving a demo on the old tradition of rope making
RIGHT: Some of the crowds gathered indoors before COVID entered our lives



MIDDLE AND BOTTOM LEFT: Kathleen Donaghey from the Loy Association of Ireland on Potato Day
BOTTOM RIGHT: David Langford, expert in all things potato, one of our guest speakers



While the world closed down, the Organic Centre kept going and found ways to reach out and host many events throughout lockdown!

Biodiversity Day online

We hosted Padraic Fogarty from the Irish Wildlife Trust and author on our Biodiversity Emergency and the link between Covid 19 and habitat loss.

Cruinniu na nÓg

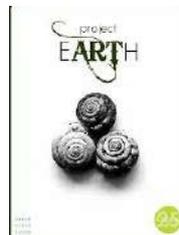
To mark Cruinniu na nÓg, the Organic Centre worked alongside artist Sarah Lundy for a children's online creative workshop on June 13th, looking for those junior nature Warriors!

Project Earth

The Organic Centre was delighted to work with talented artist Sarah Lundy hosting four separate Eco art and seasonal workshops throughout the year. These coincided with our 25th anniversary and were supported by Creative Ireland and Leitrim Co Co. This project-helped outreach to many families during lock down.

Growing Together with the Organic Centre

During lockdown the Organic Centre reached out with it's Growing Together live Facebook workshops every Wednesday at 2pm for 19 weeks.



We facilitated online discussions with community organisations including Triona Reid from **Growing Together** (a youth focused advocacy group on agriculture and food sovereignty) and **Community Power** on their aim to bring renewable energy into the hands of communities around Ireland

The Organic Centre marked **Heritage Week** by creating a video based on friend and colleague Dick Roberts. Dick is the author of the 2013 book "**Bringing the Garden Home**" and was the driving force behind the community garden here at The Organic Centre. It includes first-hand accounts about farming in the last century with many of the older growing traditions. The video premiered on August 19th and can be viewed on our Facebook page

Training / Online Training

The Organic Centre training calendar had to adapt to government restrictions and when we could, we continued to roll out training ensuring safe protocols were followed.

We had to come up to speed with Zoom very quickly and with the help of our tutors, produced 5 online training courses with diverse topics including Renewable Energy with Peter Schneider, An Introduction to Therapeutic Horticulture with Caitriona Kelly, Fish Skin Tanning with Lucy O'Hagan and Garden Eco Shed workshop on YouTube with Peter Cowman

Policy and Lobbying

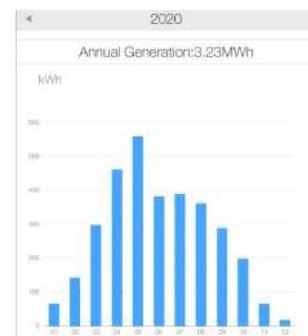
Thanks to the support of **Patagonia**, The Organic Centre worked in collaboration with **Love Leitrim** supporting the Anti-Fracking movement in Ireland. Its focus this year was to stop the importation of fracked gas and resist the threat of fracking in Northern Ireland. In the **#Pledge4Climate** campaign, The Organic Centre jointly organised an **election hustings** on Feb 3rd to coincide with the **General Election 2020** and an online petition to the election candidates with **Friends of the Earth Ireland**. Pledges from TD's were integral in ensuring that a commitment to stop importation of fracked gas was on the new Program for Government.

The Organic Centre is supporting **Love Leitrim** and **Anti Fracking** groups in Fermanagh as the threat of fracking remains in Northern Ireland. The **#ActDon'tFrack** campaign has included an online petition and round table discussions with Northern Ireland politicians. This campaign is ongoing.

The Organic Centre is proud to work alongside our partners in the **Irish Environmental Network** and support their campaigns to **reduce climate change and biodiversity loss** throughout the year. We look forward to continuing that work in 2021

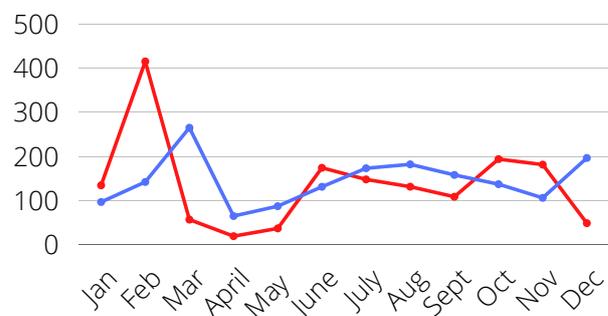
Sustainability

Our solar panels, installed Dec '19 have reduced our CO2 emissions by 5.76 tonnes this year alone. That's the equivalent of 245 bags of waste recycled instead of being sent to landfill. Any extra electricity is sent back to heat our water



Rainfall

Steve collects our rainfall records every morning at 9am. The amounts are totalled at the end of the month and forwarded to Met Éireann. They have been recorded here at the centre for the last 20 years, started by Hans Wieland in 2000. 2020 can be seen in red while 2019 totals are in blue



Social Media Reach

During 2020 the Organic Centre reached out to **6,834** people on our database with **6 newsletter bulletins**.

Our **Growing Together** workshop Facebook live sessions had a reach of **8,200**



9,936 likes
11,330 followers



1,931
followers



3,437
followers

THE ORGANIC HORTICULTURE QQI LEVEL 5 COURSE

The QQI Level 5 Horticulture course kicked off on the 17th of February last year with **10 participants**. Unfortunately some three weeks later **Covid 19 lock-down** hit. This meant that two participants were unable to remain committed to the programme due to family responsibilities. Another participant left in December to begin employment at The Organic Centre leaving us with seven learners by completion of the programme at the end of February 2021. We also bid an indeterminate farewell to **Sabine Waniek** as course coordinator as she left on carers leave in the summer with **Ingrid Foley** taking over her duties.

The course had to be **extended** by four weeks to allow staff and students extra time to deliver and complete course work due to the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic. The course was conducted entirely **online** from Monday 16th March until outdoor work was permitted in mid -August and socially distanced class sessions from September until level 5 lock down from Monday 4th January for the remainder of the programme.

The consequences of this were very frequent changes in plans of delivery, three module exams being converted to Covid assignments but most importantly, a highly significant reduction in the amount of time our learners spent on practical horticulture at the Organic Centre. This meant that course staff Steve Hoey, Phil Wheal and Ingrid Foley, with the ongoing help of former student and on placement volunteer Yuji Shimobayashi, had to assume significant extra workloads in managing **crop production**. This was essential in order to maintain produce for sale but mostly to ensure course learners would have access to their course materials and practical content whenever they were able to return to their outdoor training. In this we were as successful as could be hoped for in the circumstances, creating a very active WhatsApp group to relay video and photographic material for our learners to absorb in lieu of their own practical training.

Where it was possible, we also supported learners in their own home - based growing projects to maintain the best practical experience to be achieved during their absence.

The Horticulture programme 2020 was the first to feature the newly created **Biodiversity module** with a view to expanding the breadth of the course at a time when awareness of Biodiversity and the need for its integration into agricultural practices have come to the fore. The module was developed by co-ordinators Sabine Waniek and Ingrid Foley in conjunction with staff from MSLETB and was subsequently delivered and assessed during the winter of 2020/21.

To make way for this new subject the module Organic Principles & Standards was removed from the curriculum and a new version of Organic Production was developed by co-ordinator Phil Wheal in conjunction with staff from MSLETB. This means that course participants are no longer assessed in areas such as knowledge of organic standards and sources of funding and information for organic growers. However, these areas are still taught and key skills and learning around the development of organic fertility/rotation plans, production plans and marketing remain core assessed activities. The remaining seven modules delivered were:

Soils and Growing Media

**Fruit & Vegetable Production,
Plant Science,
Plant ID & Use,
Plant Protection,
Team working &
Work Practice.**

Our energies are going into preparing the new QQI Level 5 Horticultural Training Course for 2021/22 beginning on March 8th.

Interviews are scheduled to be conducted online on February 9th and planning for potentially beginning an online course until restrictions are eased is being undertaken jointly with MSLETB

Who are our funders?

pistes solidaires



The Organic Centre is a **social enterprise**. Social enterprises are businesses whose core objective is to achieve a social, societal, or environmental impact. They frequently work to support disadvantaged groups such as the long-term unemployed, people with disabilities, travellers, etc., or to address issues such as food poverty, social housing, or environmental matters.

There is a wide spectrum of social enterprises in Ireland, from local community-based enterprises to larger enterprises, some of which trade internationally. They create employment and support many Government policy objectives in areas such as labour market activation, health care and the environment.

Like other businesses, social enterprises pursue their objectives by trading in goods and services on an ongoing basis. However, any surpluses generated by social enterprises are re-invested into achieving social objectives, rather than maximising profit for their owners.

While our funding covers some overheads such as staff costs, we generate approximately half our income from our shop and seeds, running courses, selling produce, apple juicing, transplants and various community projects. This is due in a large part from the hard work of our staff and your continuing support. For this we **thank you**



We lost a good friend this year.....

Jill's particular brand of magic was born of generosity, expertise and enthusiasm, and will always be appreciated by us and the wider organic circle of gardeners – more than words can say.

Jill Scott, our long term friend and colleague has passed away earlier this year. Jill worked her magic here at the Organic Centre since the very beginning and we will miss her enormously. She has left us a beautiful legacy of her generosity and unusual plants. She supported us in many ways, solidly, but with so little fanfare that some of us may be unaware of just how hard she was working. More often than not her husband Mark was working alongside her, quietly and steadily giving his time and energy and support. They have been true friends of the Organic Centre all through the years.

