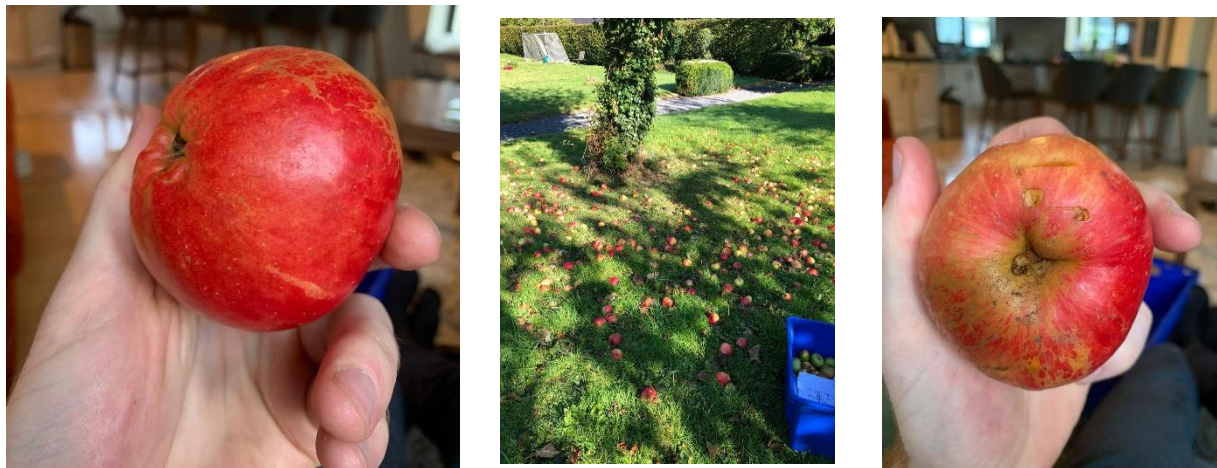


Discovering Orchards and reconnecting with our Traditions

The past season I've been trying alternative ways of growing apple trees and undertaking experiments in grafting. I've also continued surveying orchards and identifying varieties of apples that people have sent to me. I had the largest crop of apples I'd ever seen at my home place in Clare, which was definitely from the car full of fresh seaweed I collected at Seafield, Quilty. I mulched the trees with seaweed making sure to allow a foot or so clearance around the trees. My apple trees were never so healthy and laden with fruit.

In Springtime I ran out of rootstocks and pots so I decided to graft on to cuttings of Irish Pitcher and Ballyvaughan Seedling which I then planted into lazy beds. I mulched with grass clippings and sprayed homemade seaweed feed in July. I let clover grow around the base and I would pull weed it occasionally and let the clover mulch the surface for nutrients. Surprisingly they grew much better in the ground than pots. From experimentation, three year-old wood roots better as a rootstock for grafting, than older wood which has aerial roots. Older wood with burr knots root well if you want a large readymade tree, but younger wood works well for a rootstock. Ballyvaughan seedling is about M106 height on its own roots so that is a good indicator. In August, I harvested wild clover seed in the garden and sowed it as green manure. Altogether, the experiment cost nothing except time.

Below; Sample of Bloody Butcher collected by Fergal Scully from an old tree in Laois.



There were a couple of surprising finds in Autumn with a sample of Bloody Butcher which I identified from an orchard in Laois that Fergal Scully documented. The original family had long died out and the landed estate house was levelled in the 1960's but a section of the orchard survived. In many places old apple trees are the only living connection to our heritage, often the knowledge dies with the original owners. Their identity remains a mystery until a variety name or another similar tree is located. The DNA of Bloody Butcher matches a variety from Hungary, so it's intriguing to imagine how it came to Ireland. I was delighted to find a very old tree of Brown Crofton in Galway in a walled garden. It's reassuring that these varieties are still to be

found, roughly 70 years after Dr. Keith Lamb surveyed and collected and compiled the original collection of Irish Heritage apples. It's even more exciting to think what else is overlooked in those surviving orchards. Many are undocumented and neglected. Once you get used to old orchards you often encounter the same varieties within a region.

During the Summer, my wife Maria and I made the decision to finally move back to her home place in Galway with our newborn son Cathal, who was born in July. My wife grew up next to the sea and feels seasick being away from it for any length of time. Carna is situated in the West Galway Gaeltacht in an area called Iorras Aithneach, which translates as the windy peninsula.

Below: Our garden with lazy beds



In the area there's a tradition of growing vegetables in lazy beds fertilised with seaweed. In the small fields there are still lazy bed remains from famine times garden, and you feel connected to the landscape when you continue this practice. It helps to graze a field with animals for a season before planting lazy beds as the grass is short and easy to dig, and the ground is rich in nutrients. The only way to cultivate the soil is with a spade and the yields are much higher than ploughed soil and tolerates drought well. Also, you can grow efficiently in wet boggy ground. When done

properly, planting with lazy beds is highly productive. I've started a few experiments in composting seaweed, bracken, grass clipping, clover, and sea shells (for calcium). Razor clam and crab shells crumble and breakdown well.

Below; first generation seedlings from home saved Mayo common cabbage plants. The cabbages show great variation, some are more savoy like leaves with york style heads, while others are like cow cabbage. It's good to keep an open eye for mutations such as larger cabbages and drought/wind resistance.



I've been delighted with a number of varieties of open pollinated brassicas that I have carefully saved seed from last year. They produced fantastic robust seedlings, Mayo Common Cabbage is probably the most impressive variety of landrace cabbage I've grown, its very adaptable to a new environment which shows a lot of genetic diversity in action. I harvested the seed in July and sowed it direct in the ground in August, surprisingly none suffered root fly in contrast to the module ones which seem to suffer from root fly. Quite a few were damaged by a wild storm in September but the more leathery plants survived. In April, I sowed Western Perfection Swede which I had saved from open pollinated plants in my home place. I was surprised they grew so well because I saved them in 2017 and I found the packet when sorting through the shed .I've a

number of plants that I've selected and attached labels to save seed from next July. I was delighted to grow some large pumpkins, which I barter with neighbours for fish, honey and eggs.

I'll be kept busy next year planting lazy beds of spuds which are a reliable currency for bartering. I plan to do a few more experiments in potato breeding and saving open pollinated varieties. I hope to survey more orchards and connect with anyone who would like me to identify apple varieties for them.