

An Arborist Exchange to Ireland's "Church of the Oak"

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"The Cut" Forest Car Park in the Slieve Bloom Mountains of Glendine, Clonaslee, County Laois

I'm an arborist who feels most at home in church or surrounded by trees, so no place on earth could have been more inviting than County Kildare, Ireland. Kildare, or "Cill Dara" in Old Irish, stands for "church of the oak," and the County lives up to its name.

Though Ireland has only two native oak species, the sessile oak (*Quercus petraea*) and pedunculate oak (*Q. robur*), the lack of diversity is made up for in longevity and character. It's no wonder the oaks were prized by the ancient Celts in their culture and ceremonies and still marveled at today. The strong, formative oaks are the perfect complement to Ireland's rich history and castle-studded landscapes.

From *The Book of Kells* in the Old Library at Trinity College in Dublin, to the oldest tree in Ireland—its famous yew (*Taxus baccata*) at St. Patrick's College in Maynooth—Ireland has hundreds more years of history to offer than its sister city of Lexington, Kentucky.

I was paired up with Simon Wallace, Park Superintendent for County Kildare. Wallace is the tree czar for the community; anything that deals with trees goes through him. He is in charge of planning, designing, and developing parks in the County and is responsible for street trees as well.

Wallace fields general tree questions from the public and manages the tree work contracted out by the local

"tree surgeon," as they call arborists in Ireland. County Kildare is 654 square miles (1694 sq km), so Wallace has a lot of ground to cover. His impact on Ireland's urban forest and the citizens of the County is crucial. Ireland's forested land cover is only around 10 percent, which means the local communities really need to sustain and take care of the trees they have.

Education and outreach is a major part of Wallace's interaction with officials and citizens. Steeped in the psyche of some Irish is the mentality that trees are a crop that competes with other crops and a hindrance to the sunshine. This, however, is changing with government policies meant to foster an increase in the percentage of forested land. These policies include promoting and funding private forestry rather than government owned forestry, developing more amenity woodlands, and regenerating native woodlands. In Kildare, there is an increasing focus on climate change, carbon footprints, and biodiversity and the important role trees play in these. This is creating a greater awareness and appreciation for the value of trees among the citizenry.

When he visited Kentucky, Wallace was surprised to see how close we like our shade trees to our houses. In Ireland, trees are planted in yards but they are smaller and are sited so as not to cast direct shade over homes. I can't really blame the Irish for this because, I am told, they count themselves blessed to see the sun



(Left to right) John Murphy of Annaveigh Nursery, John Saylor, Simon Wallace



A cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) on the grounds of the Carton House in County Kildare



Castletown House and Parklands in Celbridge, County Kildare



A beech tree (*Fagus sylvatica*) graces the grounds of the Carton House, a former estate in County Kildare—now a resort, spa, and golf course.

pop out on any given day. I even bought my daughters a shirt that highlighted “the four seasons of Ireland” (see pic).

Highlights of my trip to County Kildare included visits to some of the most famous Irish castles and parklands where Wallace liases with the landscaping staff. The great divide among local, state, and federal government isn’t so divided in Ireland, where the Department of Agriculture & Forest Service is the umbrella agency for the promotion and control of mainly commercial forestry in Ireland. Then there’s Coillte, a semi-state organization responsible for large tracts of forestry throughout the country including some areas which are specifically developed for amenity, like Donadea Forest Park. The Office of Public Works is responsible for the many historical and cultural properties including national parks throughout the country. These agencies are far more interconnected than here in the States.

During a visit to Castletown Demense in Kildare, the maintenance crew leader Rory Finnegan and I swapped stories of our love for trees. I told him about how my wife accuses me of using her as a prop in our honeymoon photos so that I would have a scale to show off the trees behind her. Finnegan explained how he delayed his honeymoon because of their Arbor Day festivities.



A souvenir for John’s daughters

Wallace and I also visited Annaveigh Nursery in County Tipperary, home to some of the plant material for his planting project in County Kildare. I enjoyed owner John Murphy’s hospitality and love for trees and plants. Also interesting was Avondale House & Forest Park in County Wicklow, which is basically a forested arboretum with 100-plus-year-old plots of single species trees for research to determine which species do well in Ireland’s climate. We took a tour with retired forester Nicky Kirwan, who treated us to his knowledge of the grounds



The Old Library at Trinity College in Dublin



Bog land owned by the Irish Peatland Conservation Council



Forester Nicky Kirwan (right) gave Saylor a tour of the trees of Avondale House & Forest Park in County Wicklow.

and gave us insight on the trees that perform best in his country.

One of my favorite things about the exchange was realizing that all the long hours I spent studying botanical names in college finally paid off. Like all tree nerds, I have used my botanical names to impress people, but

this was different. I actually needed to drop the common names and go to the botanical names so Wallace and I could communicate about the trees we were seeing. My professors always told me this was why memorization is important, but it was great to finally experience the true need for botanical names.

I would like to extend my gratitude to Wallace. He was an exceptional host and went above and beyond to make me feel at home—and as Irish as a Kentucky boy can feel. I would also like to thank the Society of Municipal Arborists for selecting us for the 2013 exchange.

This exchange has been a long time in the making. After blindly applying for years, I finally decided to pursue connecting with one of our sister cities. In 2010, Lexington hosted the World Equestrian Games and I met with a delegation from sister “city” County Kildare. When they went back to Ireland, I applied to the arborist exchange, and they picked Wallace and me. He and I were excited to see the exchange finally come to fruition in 2013.

I’ve always appreciated the power of exchange, whether through ideas or in more practical ways like how a municipality funds their tree programs or how someone has streamlined their job duties. I encourage every municipal arborist to take advantage of what our field offers and apply for this exchange or attend the Municipal Forestry Institute, which I also did. While building the urban forestry program in Lexington, I apply the wealth of knowledge I’ve received from these amazing experiences every day. 🍀



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