

# GOOD TREES – OR BAD TREES?

ORLA FARRELL wants help to meet hostile questions with a simple message

“So you’re planting trees?” (A frown, a pause, then a deep breath). “What kind of trees?” (This said always in a dark tone with a guarded and suspicious look).

Everyone wants to know if the Easy Treesie/Crann – Trees for Ireland project is planting “good” trees, or “bad, forest or foreign” trees.

Most of the people I meet who plant trees seem to be under suspicion of being a Friend of Bad Trees. Our fellow Plantees in the global project find the question puzzling; it appears peculiar to Ireland. Within a few short weeks of joining us, our environmental intern, A B from Pakistan, was already rather exasperated from people asking him the same thing, the perennial hostile question as quoted above. We wondered could a united response from tree-lovers be developed, one that could be distilled and presented on a t-shirt?

When we say we plant mostly native trees there is usually this sigh of relief. “Oh, well, I was so afraid you would be planting some of those non-native trees like those evergreens, those commercial trees that are so awful.” Of the 100,000-plus trees we have planted with children all over the country, we have in fact planted evergreens, predominantly native Irish holly, Scots pine and yew, though only one was a spruce, a permanent Christmas tree planted at Grange in Cooley, Co Louth. It is not on the Irish native list but it is a lovely tree for the purpose.

David Attenborough, who supported our Science Week planting initiative, has commented that both recreational and commercial planting are needed to capture carbon. Since Easy Treesie/Crann is planting on public lands, our saplings are educating children, storing carbon, beautifying parks, streets and hospitals and are not a commercial venture. We just don’t like feeling

under attack for liking trees that are not on the current native list. We have planted fig, plum and heritage apple trees at Dublin City Farm, none of which is native – and we empathise with other tree planters, whether they are public, commercial or private. Irish people are not native to this land. Most of our agricultural produce (including potatoes) isn’t native. An apple tree is not native (though a crab-apple is). Nor is a beech, a maple, a horse chestnut. Nor is lime or sycamore, beloved by bees. As everywhere, nature abhors a vacuum; in geological timeframes what is native today was not yesterday and will not be tomorrow.

So our challenge is in what way can we get across to people that a non-native tree is still, unless it is invasive, a grand tree. I asked my daughter Aoife, our family engineer who runs a business service “We Make Everything Simple.com” how she might respond to this question. Aoife suggested a response like this:

“So, for a while there was a strong ‘native good, non-native bad’ mantra in vogue. People realised that not all trees work in all



Orla Farrell (extreme right) is searching for answers to unfriendly questions in the Easy Treesie/Crann project that has planted many thousands of trees with schoolchildren all over the country



Birds need a variety of tree species to thrive. Picture: Susulyka, wikimedia

environments, and they wanted an easy way to understand the problem. Somehow, native vs non-native became the single answer. This over-simplification needs refinement to capture the complexity of evolution.

That easy-to-follow motto was something I latched onto too. We even made a series of videos to teach people about native Irish trees specifically! When we first started planting trees with kids, we knew it was very important that our trees would thrive. For this reason we always plant under the supervision of a forester, arborist or horticulturalist. To find the best tree, experts understand a whole range of criteria, and how they interact. Things like: what other species are in the area? What is the topography like? What about the soil? Is the area likely to flood? Is it near a river? Is it hit by a sea breeze? How much space is available? These kinds of questions determine whether or not a particular species will survive, whether it will be resilient against disease, whether it will be compatible with

other vegetation and wildlife in the area, what its long term impact will be, and (importantly for us) whether it will do a great job at sequestering carbon. We have learned from the experts that oftentimes, when you weigh all those factors up, the trees that will contribute most may not always be native ones.

As our understanding developed we moved away from the old ‘native good, others bad’ mantra and replaced it with one the scientists and experts could get behind. ‘Right Tree, Right Place’. This is the Hot Goss!

It’s so important to get advice from a professional, someone who can interpret the complex interplay of environmental factors in an area and calculate the best option. Most times that’s a native species, sometimes it’s not.

Another factor that has influenced our shift from ‘native good, non-native bad’ is an increased understanding of the importance of diversity. We’ve learned from experience that if we limit ourselves to native trees only, we

run a high risk of wipe-out as their genetic variation can be very narrow.

So where are we now on the good trees vs or bad trees challenge? ORLA FARRELL wants help to meet hostile questions with a simple message. Right Tree, Right Place.

Since focus is now on carbon sequestration and avoiding outbreaks of disease in woodlands, the best solution for climate resilience is to include variety, as long as the species are non-invasive. Furthermore, climate changes mean that homes for species of bird and other wildlife are no longer suitable for them due to disease, droughts, heatwaves and other weather events. These

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species can find refuge in more varied habitats.

As a final thought, I have always loved the comment by Sir Ranulph Fiennes, so much in fact that we put it in a school song once: “No such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothes.” Perhaps we could boil our answer down to: ‘No such thing as bad trees, only inappropriate planting.’ Though that is a double negative. We need it a little simpler. I ran it by Joe Barry, one of our Crann tree experts. “We like all trees and all have their place,” he comments. “Thousands of native broadleaves have been planted by well-meaning individuals on sites that were totally unsuitable, and the results can be seen all over Ireland in stunted and diseased woods.

So, how do YOU, dear reader, think we can respond best with the inside scoop to this daily question? Please send us a tree-mail at [orla@easytreesie.com](mailto:orla@easytreesie.com). Stay well!

See also: Joe Barry on Pages 6-9