

Forestry at heart of multi-faceted farm enterprise

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The area surrounding Lough Derg is one of Ireland's most scenic areas. It's been a focus for culture and innovation from pagan times to the start of the Christian era and right up to the early modern industrialisation of Ireland with the Shannon Hydro Electric scheme.

The area where the lake kisses Co Tipperary inspired the poetic genius of one of Tipperary's most favourite artists, Shane McGowan.

*"So I walked as day was dawning
Where small birds sang and leaves
were falling*

*Where we once watched the row boats
landing*

By the broad majestic Shannon"

Nestling among the windy roads of north Tipperary, between Ballinderry and Coolbawn, lies Brookfield Farm.



Ailbhe Gerrard, right, hired a contractor to cut and extract trees by chainsaw and horse.

Its owner is Ailbhe Gerrard who started farming there in 2010 and has won many prestigious awards for her approach to organic farming, business and forestry.

Ailbhe is a farmer by choice. In 2010, after a very successful career in construction, which took her to many parts of the world, she settled near her home in north Tipperary. "I purchased a 30ha farm. Approximately 25% of the farm was under broadleaf forestry of which 4.5ha required thinning."

The forestry comprised ash, oak and sycamore with each species requiring a different thinning strategy. At the time, the broadleaf thinning grant was coming in but Ailbhe chose not to avail of it.

Having attended a number of field days she had accumulated knowledge of how to assess a stand and she personally marked the potential crop trees (PCTs) and also those to be removed. At this stage, she hired a contractor to cut and extract trees by chainsaw and horse.

At the time the firewood fetched a roadside price of €45/m³. However, the costs were high because of the method of harvesting. But the first thinning was done. "On the second thinning, I applied for the grant," says Ailbhe. This grant is €750/ha. "With the PCTs marked from the first thinning I again marked the trees to be removed. This was based on their competition in the crown."

Ailbhe's income and expenditure are shown in Table 1.

As the PCTs in her forest are getting



bigger, with the diameter now averaging just under 20cm, Ailbhe says there is an urgent need to look at new ways of utilising wood. To this end she is involved with a Teagasc and GMIT Letterfrack project to test the quality of Irish hardwoods.

Brookfield is also expanding its forest cover. "We're in the process of planting native woodland and agro forestry on the farm," says Ailbhe.

As well as this, she is also laying out a truffle orchard. "Farming is about food production, she says. In many parts of the world, food production and forestry are compatible with one another. I'm integrating the forestry with the other enterprises I have."

Bees

Bio-diversity is core to Ailbhe's philosophy of farming. "This is why I put bee hives on the farm," she says. Along with her background in rural development she set up the "hive share project". This is where people can buy part of, or a full, bee hive.

For that, they get a minimum of five jars of your own hive's honey, right

Table 1: Ailbhe Gerrard's income and expenditure

Sale of timber 4.8ha second broadleaf thinning. Inclusive of woodland improvement grant

Approximately five lorries equivalent €1,500 each – average (25-30m ³ of firewood harvest per ha)	€7,500
Woodland improvement grant 750 x 4.8	€3,600
Total income grant plus sales	€11,100
Costs	€9,600
Total profit margin	€1,500
Approximate margin per hectare	€300 (€12/m ³ timber standing, 25m ³ /ha)



Ailbhe (with hat) is passionate about biodiversity and demonstrates desirable plant species to visitors.

up to at least 30 250ml jars from the whole hive, plus the candles and balm in a presentation tin. Participants also get regular updates on their hive, and an invitation to the farm's "Honey Celebration" after the harvest (August or September), when they can see their busy bees and collect honey.

"Forestry is very important to this," says Ailbhe. "Sycamore, in particular, is an exceptional pollen producer. That's the raw material. The bees do the rest."

Lamb

Lamb is the other big product sold at Brookfield. Lambs are bought in from organic farms and are finished on the farm. "The lamb is delivered straight to the customer from the butcher as a half or a whole lamb, generally cut to the customer's specifications," says Ailbhe. "My goal is to have my own breeding programme here in the next year or so.

"I feel that forestry can complement the lamb enterprise. In many parts of the world, wood is used for flavouring.



Above: Ailbhe says sycamore is an exceptional pollen source for bees.

This is something I'm investigating, especially in relation to small diameter material. It's all about finding innovative marketing techniques."

Direct selling

Ailbhe constantly emphasises the importance of branding. As an organic farmer, the level of record keeping needed is high. Even though Brookfield farm is not an open farm, Ailbhe encourages visits.

"Consumers can see how we produce our products," she says. Most products produced on Brookfield farm are sold directly to the customer. The only exception is the firewood which is sold wholesale.

"I'm fascinated by the products," says Ailbhe. "I'm as profitable as some of the most efficient dairy farms," she says, with an air of confidence that is far removed from arrogance.

"As farmers we're obsessed with income for product tonnes rather than on selling the link to production. I believe this is what farms need to look to if they want a fair return."