

Forests: helping us to re-connect with nature

Now more than ever, individuals and society are questioning “the meaning of life” and seeking answers. A new native woodland in Roscommon offers a re-connection with nature

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In the gently rolling limestone fields of south Roscommon, Hillside Holistic Farm offers a helping hand to people looking for answers and guidance towards wellbeing and fulfilment. Since 2004, the farm has been run by Sean and Helen Butler as an organic beef farm and holistic centre, with wellbeing and empowerment at the heart of everything they do.

Describing himself as an energy healer and organic farmer with a mission “to help people to find peace with themselves”, Sean is the fifth generation of the Butler family to work the land. Helen is not from a farming background and Sean says she “brings a different type of thinking.”

Concerned by increasing animal health issues and dependence on medicines in conventional farming,

the Butlers looked for a different, more natural approach, and in 2002, they began a two year conversion to an organic system that aimed to “create a less stressful environment for the animals and produce healthier meat.”

Unexpectedly, the move to organics also brought health and lifestyle benefits for Sean and Helen. Wanting to share these positive health and lifestyle benefits with others, they developed their interest in alternative therapies.

Today, Hillside Holistic Farm is a working organic farm and a recognised hub for holistic healing, youth and project mentoring and social farming. With a dedicated therapy room that can be used by groups and therapists, the farm itself provides a calming backdrop and unique opportunity to re-connect with nature.

Native woodland

Sean has long harboured a desire to plant a broadleaf forest to complement the farm environment and offer



Noel Kennedy and Sean Butler.

additional therapeutic benefits. I had met him several years ago to look into this in more detail.

In Sean’s mind, planting trees “would allow him to work with the land and not against it.”

In addition to the many positives for biodiversity and water quality, Sean and Helen also noted the growing evidence showing the wider wellbeing benefits of spending time with trees.

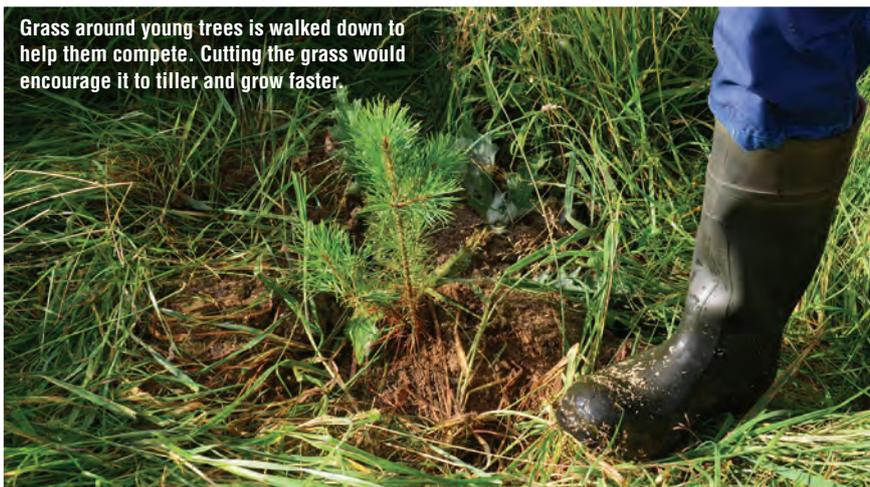
In 2019, the Butlers decided to dedicate 11ha, approximately one-third of the farm, to planting a new native woodland that reflected, in their eyes, a natural, positive and practical change.

To accommodate the new trees, they made the difficult decision to get out of sheep and concentrate on the suckler herd.

Liaising with a registered forester from Western Forestry Co-Op, a Native Woodland Establishment (NWS) grant application was submitted in autumn 2019.

Following a lengthy process of operational and environmental assessment and public consultation, a

Grass around young trees is walked down to help them compete. Cutting the grass would encourage it to tiller and grow faster.





grant approval was issued by DAFM in early 2021, with planting completed in March – an ideal time for tree planting – and appropriately during National Tree Week!

NWS supports the planting of native trees, with the selection of species guided by soil type and vegetation indicator species. Pre-planting preparation follows close-to-nature principles, resulting in minimal soil and environmental disturbance.

The Butlers' new native woodland has three main species – Pedunculate oak, Downy birch and Hazel – all supporting a rich biodiversity as they grow. Other species include Wild cherry, Hawthorn, Holly and Scots pine – an iconic native conifer.

The woodland was planted, and will be maintained, by the Western Forestry Co-Op until the trees are established, normally after four to five years, in return for the Afforestation Grant.

The annual forestry premium will yield €7,500 for 15 years, which will, according to Sean, more than compensate for the loss of sheep income,

factoring in the income tax exemption available for the forestry premiums.

The young trees have gotten off to a good start with healthy new growth – but so too has the grass. Sean has been working with his forestry company to carry out 'grass cleaning' which ensures the grass does not hold back the trees.

All grass control is manual and no herbicides will be used to establish the trees, which, for the Butlers, is a really positive feature of the native woodland scheme.

Forest bathing

Already an integral part of the farm, the Butlers see many opportunities for the new woodland in the years ahead, not least the therapeutic potential for energy healing and facilitating social farming initiatives with vulnerable groups.

Of particular interest is the Japanese concept of Shinrin-yoku or 'forest bathing' which allows people to take time out, slow down and connect with nature.

The Japanese have long recognised the benefits of interacting with trees, with research now supporting the claims of physiological and psychological benefits.

Hillside Holistic Farm also facilitates social farming, which Sean says "has given us the opportunity to share the benefits of farm life with others."

He is excited that the growing woodland will add to the social farming experience, providing opportunities to work or just get a feel for the outdoors, bringing a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing.

The future

As we slowly – and with some trepidation – recover from the impacts of the pandemic, the unique skills, services and facilities offered by Hillside Holistic Farm may be sought after like never before – and the native woodland will play its part in the years, decades and centuries ahead.

As they grow older, the oak, birch, hazel, cherry and other assorted native trees will provide new homes for many flowers, insects and animals, bring a riot of autumnal colour, store away carbon in the timber, while giving shade and shelter to stock grazing in neighbouring fields.

But maybe their greatest contribution will be fostering the human connection with the natural world for those who choose to "bathe" in the forest and experience peace, tranquility and self-fulfilment.

Trees truly are amazing.

More information on Hillside Holistic Farm is available at <https://hillsideholisticfarm.ie/> and the Native Woodland Establishment at <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/grants/establishment-grants/native-woodland-establishment/>

Thinking of planting?

There are so many good reasons to plant forestry. As well as Native Woodlands, there is now support available to plant other types of forestry, including commercial conifers, agro-forestry and forests for fuelwood. DAFM's Afforestation Grant and Premium scheme supports planting through afforestation grants and annual premium support.

Annual premiums are paid for 15 years and typically range €510 to €680/ha. For more information on planting, talk to your local Teagasc forestry adviser or see <https://www.teagasc.ie/crops/forestry/grants/establishment-grants/>

New forests may also be eligible for Basic Payment.