

Aiming for success in market gardening

John Mulhern profiles a student who is entering a second career in the fascinating world of horticulture.

John Mulhern

John Mulhern, principal at the Teagasc College of Amenity Horticulture at the National Botanic Gardens.



Peter Kelleher is a part-time student in the Teagasc College of Amenity Horticulture. He is studying for a degree in horticulture, which is delivered at the Teagasc Horticulture College sites in the National Botanic Gardens and at Teagasc Ashtown Food Research Centre.

"I served in the Defence Forces (DF) for 20 years and retired in 2019, aged 39, at the rank of commandant," Peter says. "I learned many life skills in the DF, not least the importance of continued education. I always had a love of plants and growing, so I knew it was a field I would pursue. The transition from soldier to gardener may not be as huge a change in mindset as it might seem!

"Another motivation for going into this sector was a sense of responsibility to my kids, to show them that there are ways to produce high-quality food with minimal impact on the environment."

Peter came to the Teagasc College in Glasnevin and enrolled on the Level 5 Certificate in Horticulture and followed up with an Advanced Cert in Horticulture the year after. This also qualifies Peter for a Green Cert.

He has decided to continue his studies to degree level, which can be achieved within the Teagasc College.

"I recently attended a National Organic Training Skillsnet conference called Biofarm 2021," says Peter.

"One of the speakers, Pat Cronin, spoke of the grower as a crucial and respected member of the community. He also spoke about being able to produce food profitably on sites of 1,000m². That resonated with me."

Peter aims to establish a profitable, sustainable market garden producing high-quality niche vegetables at a fair price for him and the consumer. He also hopes to pass on his knowledge.

"My ultimate goal is to develop a market garden operation at my home



Peter in the campus vegetable garden

in Kilkenny outside Dundalk, Co Louth," says Peter.

"The holding consists of 2.2ac, which includes my garden and about 0.5ac under cobnut cultivation, so I am working with about 1.2ac for food production."

Challenge

"This academic year has been difficult to manage, in terms of work-life balance. My wife works full-time, and we have three boys aged 12, 9 and 6. Managing them is a full-time job. Lecturers give us plenty of time to complete assignments, but it is often a scramble to get them in on time.

"I am conducting this year on a module basis, where I complete the degree over a longer time period, which means a more manageable time commitment.

"The biggest loss over the last two COVID years has been the reduction of on-campus time. I started a full-time Level 5 cert in 2019 and was lucky to be part of a wonderful group. Students were from across the age profile, including school leavers and retirees.

"There was a brilliant dynamic with the elder lemons in a mentoring role and the younger cohort full of energy and ideas. I made friends in all age groups. It led to us challenging our opinions and there was a strong practical component."

We are sure that Peter's Teagasc experiences and qualifications will help him achieve his goals.

More information on college courses in the Teagasc College of Horticulture are available on the Teagasc website at the Botanic Gardens page.