

Businesses in perfect synch

A garden centre and a dairy herd work well together on this Meath farm.

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Aileen Muldoon, her husband Frank Byrne and their son Aran operate two independent businesses on their 60ha near Slane, Co Meath. Frank and Aran run a 150-cow dairy herd, farming 80ha, while Aileen's business is the Boyne Garden Centre and Nursery. This is not a diversification story.

Both businesses have grown steadily and in parallel over the last 25 years. The garden centre and nursery just occupy an acre but is financially strong in its own right. The dairy enterprise is thriving too.

Frank took over the 20 cow dairy herd after leaving St Pats Agriculture College in 1976. Today, after immense work by the Byrne family, the business has grown into a high performing herd. They have won many awards over the years in the North Eastern Holstein Friesian Club (NEHFC). Glenrowan Holstein pedigree herd supplies milk to Lakeland Dairies and sells surplus stock.

Aileen grew up in the suburbs of Dublin, not far as the crow flies from northeast Co Meath. "Both Frank and I were interested in fruit and vegetables and amenity plants of all kinds, so when we married and built a house, we allowed ourselves the luxury of an acre of garden," she says.

Previously a nurse and keen indoor plant grower, Aileen developed the garden design herself. Neighbours and friends noted her expertise. Many sought her advice, and largely through word of mouth, a business developed.

Gradually, the business began with propagating, sourcing and supplying plants, as well as delivering a design and landscaping service. "Obviously with Frank running the farm and me contributing, I saw first-hand what it took to run a business. It certainly helped me gain experience and learn new skills," adds Aileen.

Twenty five years later, Aileen's business has gained a national and international reputation as a specialist grower of ornamental perennial plants, in particular species which attract and support pollinators. "A garden shouldn't be sterile but full of life. We particularly focus on hardy perennials which are sustainable, offer great value for money whilst supporting wildlife. Some examples of these plants are Monarda, Rudbeckia, Persicaria and Digitalis (foxglove)," she says.

So what is the relationship between the farm and the nursery? "Well the businesses are financially separate, but obviously it's a benefit for the nursery to be able to occasionally borrow a loader or other equipment from the farmyard," says Aileen.

"The greatest crossover is that Frank is heavily involved in both businesses."

It turned out that the largest workload for the nursery occurs when there is a slight easing on the dairy farm.

"By the end of April, the calving season is over and the cows are out on grass. The workload is then mainly managed by Aran," says Frank. "Aran's focus is on farming rather than on gardening, but he does have an interest in planting native tree species."

Late spring is when the garden centre also goes on the road. "A big part of our marketing involves attending



garden shows all over the country from the late spring through to late summer," says Aileen.

"We will have been growing plants to bring to these shows, loading up the trailer and travelling to 10 or more shows a year, including Fota in Cork, ClareGalway castle in Galway, and of course Bloom, which is huge."

Exhibitors compete to have the most attractive and impressive displays, and Aileen, though slow to say it, has won nine gold medals at Bloom and two 'Best in Show' awards. Frank works with Aileen preparing for and attending the shows. They are members of ISNA [Irish Specialist Nursery Association] and the Boyne Valley Garden Trail.

"I greatly enjoy working with the cows," says Frank. "But I also look forward to the show season when we bring a huge range of plants and meet hundreds of people every day. Most of them are gardening enthusiasts whom we know well and who love to





succeed, particularly if they also have qualifications from somewhere like the Teagasc colleges. We are always open to employing a person who has a passion for plants and gardening.”

Gardening centre operations course.

“The Covid pandemic actually generated an opportunity for me,” says Aileen. “It meant that I was able to join the Garden Centre Operations course at the Teagasc College at the National Botanic Gardens. All of the lectures were on Zoom and I was able to complete assignments here at the Garden Centre.

“I entered the course as a mature student and found James Brady and all the lecturers at the College to be hugely knowledgeable and supportive of students. It was an interesting collective of different age groups and backgrounds benefitting all of us!

“Doing the course taught me a lot and endorsed many of the things we were doing, even if we had learned the hard way through experience. It was thought provoking and gave me confidence, as I had been self-taught up to this point. I would highly recommend anyone considering setting up or working in a garden centre to attend this course.”

Though her garden centre is within an hour of half the country’s population, Aileen says that Covid has made location less important for specialist growers like her: “In the past, I never thought that people would be happy to choose plants from our website and receive them via courier. Now they are.

“People will always like to come and buy in person, but once you have built a relationship with them and they trust you, they don’t need to travel every time.”

Aileen advocates for doing your research before going into the garden centre, or any other type of business.

“Simply ask people who are in the industry how things are going. They will almost always help you with advice and help you to avoid pitfalls they may have encountered. “It’s never too late to change direction or begin a new chapter in life. If I can do it, anyone can,” she concludes.

buy home-grown hardy plants which Aileen and her staff have nurtured.”

Starting a business

“My advice to anyone considering starting a business of any type is to be sure you choose something that you really enjoy,” says Aileen. “That way, you’ll have the enthusiasm to overcome the many challenges that will inevitably arise.

“The next point is to start gradually and don’t overextend yourself by, for example, spending lots of money on machinery etc. That can leave you exposed if the economy turns down for a period.

“During the boom, people were able to borrow huge amounts of money and were keen to spend it. Several landscapers were overextended when the crash came. Had we expanded more aggressively, we could have been in trouble too.

“In gardening, as in farming, the weather can be challenging. In 2010,

we lost thousands of plants due to the cold snap in that spring. It knocked us back but we were able to survive as we weren’t over-extended.

“Horticulture, like farming, involves a huge range of activities, some mundane, some more exciting and it attracts an equally large range of people,” says Aileen.

“What I have learned is that the employee’s attitude is key. If they are enthusiastic and positive, they will

Level 6 Garden Centre Operations Course at the Teagasc College at the National Botanic Gardens

On completion of the course students will be able to:

- Evaluate the retail market for garden plants and products.
- Analyse garden centre layout and customer flow patterns.
- Examine product display, promotion and public relations within the garden centre industry.

- Explain the role of staff within garden centres.
- Apply routine skills necessary to display merchandise and stock.
- Apply routine skills necessary to display merchandise and maintain stock.
- Apply knowledge of a wide range of garden products and services with a view to providing professional customer service.