

Satisfying hearts and minds

Farm woodlands are making a growing contribution to Padraig Corcoran's quest for environmental, social and economic farm sustainability



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“This was my playground when I was a child,” muses Roscommon farmer Padraig Corcoran as we approach his 12 acres of 200-year-old broad-leaf woodland which is the beating heart of Mount Plunkett Nature Reserve. Adjoining the canal which links Lecarrow village, just north of Athlone, with nearby Lough Ree, the woodland and associated wetlands are the jewels in the crown of Padraig’s farm which he has been managing for the past 20 years. With an infectious enthusiasm, Padraig has established the nature reserve and has the protection of nature and wildlife at the heart of everything he does.

Satisfying hearts – farming conservation

Apart from the woodland, Padraig’s farm would be considered small and

extensive – he farms 81 acres – 16 rented – carrying sheep and store cattle – a typical Roscommon farm. But his impeccable environmental and conservation credentials are reflected in his long-term involvement in agri-environment schemes, from REPs right up to GLAS – planting hedges and trees, putting up nesting boxes, developing species-rich wetland and creating plots of wild bird cover.

On a breezy sunny morning the woodland is in full leaf – mature ash, oak, beech, sycamore and, remarkably, elm look down on hazel, holly and spindle. In brighter gaps, a new generation of younger trees grows. A handful of ewes and lambs meander through, grazing on the nutritious herb layer in the shelter of the trees. There is a cacophony of birdsong.

Woodland restoration

It wasn’t always this idyllic. “Before I bought it in 2005, the woodland, right down to the canal, had been completely abandoned for more than 25

years,” says Padraig. “It was a mess and when I got the chance I jumped at the opportunity to buy it and begin to restore it.”

For Padraig, restoring means managing both woodland and wetlands in the traditional style of farming – high nature value farming in today’s terminology. Because the area is in the Lough Ree Special Area of Conservation, this involves consultation with the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS) and other agencies to sensitively manage the multiple services provided by the woodland.

To support the sustainable development of the woodland, Padraig recently got approval for funding under the Native Woodland Conservation Scheme. Administered by the Forest Service, DAFM, the scheme prioritises sites of high ecological significance where native woodland restoration will deliver benefits regarding the protection of watercourses and aquatic habitats.

Padraig is passionate and proud

Forestry Programme 2014-2020

Padraig Corcoran farms 12 acres of 200-year-old broadleaf woodland which is the beating heart of Mount Plunkett Nature Reserve in Co Roscommon.



- Afforestation scheme: the planting of forests is supported by a range of afforestation grants and annual premiums. Forest options include commercial conifers, native woodlands, agro-forestry and forests for fuelwood. Annual premiums are paid for 15 years and typically range €501 to €635/ha. New forests may also be eligible for Basic Payment.
- Native Woodland Conservation Scheme: Focusing on the restoration of native woodlands with a range of ecological benefits this scheme offers a Native Woodland Conservation Grant up to €5,000/ha and an annual premium of €350/ha to private owners for seven years.
- For the first time, the promotion of forestry to farmers is now the subject of a national Teagasc campaign. For more information on afforestation, Native Woodland Conservation and a host of forestry topics, see www.teagasc.ie/forestry.

of what he has achieved but he is anxious to send the message to policy-makers that more joined-up thinking is required between farming and the environment to ensure that production is sustainable – economically, socially and environmentally.

Perhaps the real strength of Mount Plunkett is in the education it offers and its demonstration of what can be done. Since 2006, Padraig has hosted numerous visits and courses involving agencies ranging from Teagasc to Birdwatch Ireland and the NPWS, to the annual Roscommon Lamb Festival. Padraig particularly welcomes local schoolchildren whom he describes as “open and enthusiastic sponges for knowledge, information and ideas.”

Satisfying minds – production forestry

But, for Padraig, farming is also about being a pragmatist. His is not a big farm and, by 2012, he began to appreciate the reality of modern farming – ever longer hours and declining returns, making ends meet

is difficult even with an off-farm job. With the future of his young family to consider, he saw that in order to continue to sustainably manage the land, an alternative secure source of income would be necessary.

As Padraig saw it, the environmental focus in farming was only going to get stronger with a particular emphasis on the protection of water quality and reducing the carbon footprint. He set about seeking an alternative farm enterprise with an environmental profile to complement his own farming system.

Forestry ticked all the right boxes as an enterprise, offering these environmental benefits and more, coupled with guaranteed annual premiums and retention of the Basic Payment.

Having sourced land – marginal for farming but highly productive for forestry – Padraig planted his first farm forest – 8.8ha of Sitka spruce, Japanese larch and broadleaves in 2012. Every year since then he has been planting an additional 6ha to

8ha and is planning a further 4ha in the back-end of the year.

He has engaged a local Roscommon forestry company to do most of his planting but in 2015 he planted 3ha himself and, not surprisingly, is following its progress with particular interest. “To get the best from forestry, owners need to be in touch with what’s going on,” says Padraig. “Planting a few trees or doing a bit of grass cleaning is great experience and is good for the owner and the trees.”

In the same spirit of openness evident in Mount Plunkett, earlier this year Padraig hosted a Teagasc walk where forest owners learnt about the management of young plantations.

Padraig is delighted with the growth in his young plantations and their unashamedly strong focus on the production of commercial softwood. “Today’s plantations match strong environmental measures with really fast tree growth,” he comments. “The trees are carbon-neutral and a renewable resource – I see them as complementing the woodland conservation work in Mount Plunkett and helping to sustain the way we, as a family, want to see the farm develop.”