

■ PEOPLE



## CLAIRE CALVEY'S CULTURE SHOCK



**10.30am on a beautiful spring Sunday morning.**

The sun shines hazily over South Galway, trees are frothing with blossom and birdsong, and I'm on my hands and knees under a bush, digging for pignuts. As you do.

No, I haven't finally flipped from the strain of six children and a husband working abroad (it can be touch and go!), but instead I'm spending the day on a foraging workshop, something which, having dabbled last autumn, I've wanted to do for ages.

I started growing my own vegetables for the first time last summer, with varying results. However, while I was watering, pruning and creating supports for my vegetable patch, a whole pantry of goodies were growing right beside me in the hedgerow. Mother Nature was cleverly weaving her magic, filling the branches with heavy berries like rosehips, sloes, haws, elderberries and blackberries, without any help from me. Having grown up believing that most berries were poisonous, I had ignored the jewel-like offerings right outside my window, and were it not for a rosehip syrup recipe demonstrated on an episode of *River Cottage*, I might never have wandered outside to inspect what exactly was out there. Discovering a treasure trove, I spent a joyous few weeks making syrups, jams and cordials, as well as several bottles of sloe gin put away for Christmas. I had been bitten by the foraging bug!

Keen for more knowledge, I took to the internet and discovered foraging expert Mary Bulfin



(wildfoodmary.com) who offers, among other things, foraging workshops. It was just what I was looking for.

The workshops run during the warmer months in Offaly and Galway, and today we are at Crann Og Eco Farm outside Gort. It's the start of the season so we are a small group of four, and following a quick chat over good strong coffee, we head outside to see what we can find.

Just paces from the farmhouse, Mary drops to her knees to show us some meadowsweet, which is growing under a willow hedge. Brimming with knowledge, she explains the leaves' medicinal uses; it's a natural pain-killer and anti-inflammatory and is used in teas, jellies and syrups. Close by is a crop of bright green sorrel leaves, arrow shaped and citrus-flavoured, Mary pops some in her bag to contribute to our lunch later.

As the morning progresses we come across many spring greens and flowers – wild garlic, navelwort, ribwort, coltsfoot, cleavers, chickweed – and Mary patiently explains their culinary uses as well as their medicinal properties. Nature truly is our medicine cabinet, if only we stop to notice.

Back to the pignuts, and here we are, digging in the ground for the elusive little nuts, like hogs rooting for truffles. Mary eventually brings one to the surface and we dubiously pass it around; similar to a hazelnut and covered in mud, nobody's brave enough to give it a try.

Heading into the woods, we push through a gate which implores us 'leave no trace'. Eyes fixed to the leaf litter underfoot, we search for edibles while discussing everything from the symbiotic relationship between trees and fungi to the unsustainability of the current trend for foraged food in restaurants.

We reach a clearing where an old oak tree is surrounded by several silver birch, by now the hazy sky has given way to deep blue, a gentle breeze tickling the leaves overhead. We sit and rest, making shy enquiries into each other's lives, curious as to what brought each of us here today.

Back at the farmhouse, we help Mary rustle up a delicious lunch of wild garlic soup, homemade bread and the salad we picked ourselves, adorned with edible wild flowers, along with some local cheese and hummus. This is followed by pudding and a small sample of Mary's very own award-winning damson liquor.

After lunch we linger over coffee while Mary demonstrates how to crystallise violets for cake decoration. It's been a wonderfully relaxing and informative day, and I leave eager for future foraging forays and feeling just a little saner. As naturalist John Muir famously said, 'In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks.'

Tweet Claire  
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