

ONCE UPON A TIME, THE ISLAND OF IRELAND WAS COVERED IN:

OAK

*wild apple*

HAZEL

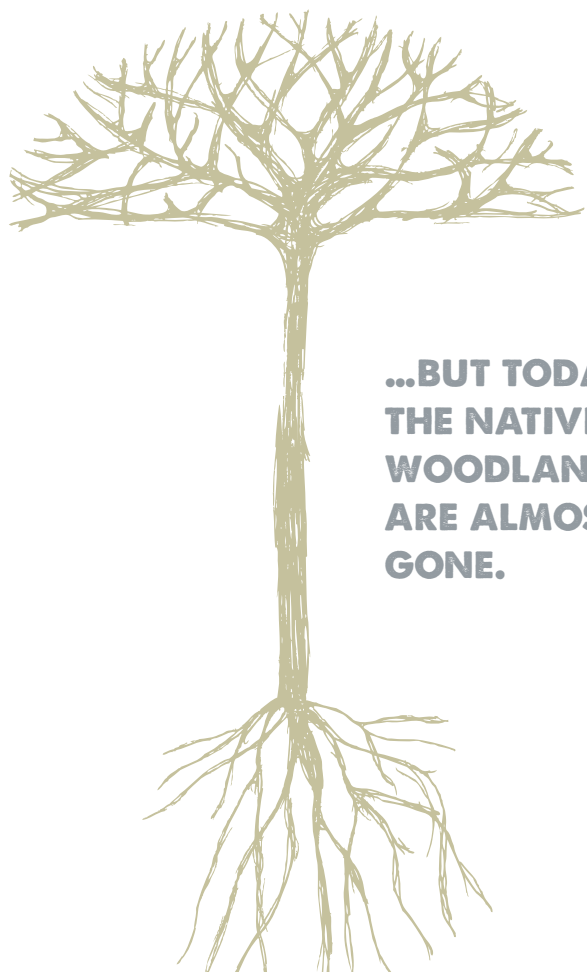
*wild cherry*

ASH

MOUNTAIN ASH

BLACKTHORN

*rowan*



**...BUT TODAY,  
THE NATIVE  
WOODLANDS  
ARE ALMOST  
GONE.**

## THE NATIVE WOODLAND TRUST

Native Irish woodlands—places filled with species that are native to Ireland—are in a precarious state and have been so for hundreds of years. The Native Woodland Trust is dedicated to the preservation of Ireland's remaining ancient woodlands for the enjoyment of all people. They purchase and protect existing ancient and native woodlands and also create new woodlands across Ireland where they would naturally occur. The Ireland Funds have assisted the Native Woodland Trust in their efforts by partnering with a donor for whom the conservation of Ireland's forests is a priority. *Connect* magazine traveled to Laragh, Co. Wicklow to meet Jim Lawlor, a Native Woodlands Trust volunteer. We walked a newly acquired site as the sun came up over the beautiful Irish countryside and Jim explained the important opportunities Ireland has to preserve and cultivate these special places.







## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CONIFER TREES AND NATIVE TREES?

When driving across Ireland, one sees many dark forests of conifer trees that dot the landscape. The difference between these man-made forests and native forests is remarkable. As we looked at tree lines of conifers, Jim explained their low ecological value. Nutrients are pumped into these forests and they tend to acidify the soil and the water. When the conifers are harvested, they tend to clear fell the lots in one go. Once the conifers are gone, bare soil remains that hasn't seen the light or been exposed to the weather for a long time. This leads to soil erosion and the pesticides and fertilisers often go into the water supply. The conifer plantations which make up most of Ireland's "forests" are capable of supporting far fewer species than native woodlands, which would have a much greater mix of tree species, and which would play host to far more species of insects, mammals, fungi and birds. It is quite probable that a single 500 year old oak would support a greater variety of species than an entire forest of planted conifers.







**Q. JIM, IRELAND IS KNOWN FOR BEING SO GREEN AND LUSH. WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT THE TREES?**

Today, we estimate that 99.9% of Ireland’s native woodland is gone.

The most valuable woodlands we have in Ireland are what we call “ancient woodlands” that pre-date 1650 and the importation of other trees into Ireland. They have been there the longest and it is where you find the rarest species of plants, flowers and insects. Our goal is also to save those spaces. They are not always protected by legislation. We can do something about this. We buy these spaces and give them the protection of private property. That isn’t to say we put a fence around them though—all of our sites are free and open to the public to enjoy.

We want to give people back an appreciation of the woodlands. It was part of our Irish culture that we seem to have lost. We want people to go in the woods and see what it is like. We want people to come to see and appreciate them.

**Q. WHAT IS SO SPECIAL ABOUT IRELAND'S NATIVE AND ANCIENT WOODLANDS IN PARTICULAR?**

We never know what we are allowing to be destroyed here. Ireland has been an island for so long. Our species of trees have been evolving here on their own. You never know what gene pools we have here that are unique to us.

For instance, we have a tree called the Irish Whitebeam that grows nowhere else in the world and it isn’t a protected species. We find these things and know they are worthy of saving.

You don’t need to go to the Amazon to discover amazing things with medicinal benefits. One of the most common drugs used is aspirin which comes from the bark of the willow tree. Well we have 12 species of willow in Ireland. Another discovery has been the substance taxol that comes from the yew tree. It is used in the treatment of cancer. The Irish Dark Honey Bee has recently been found to be resistant to the colony collapse affecting other honey bees around the world.

People have a perception that everything is already known about Ireland but that is not the case. We could still find a lot of things on our doorstep and every piece of that uniqueness could have a worldwide value.

**Q. WHAT WOULD THIS LAND WE'RE STANDING ON HAVE LOOKED LIKE A THOUSAND YEARS AGO?**

This entire area would have once been covered in woodlands. Our plans for this area are to replant pine, birch and over a dozen bio-diverse Irish species of trees.

Through the course of early history, the native Irish put in place a set of rules called “the laws of the neighborhood” which divided trees of the forest into an aristocratic structure. So you had the “nobles of the wood” such as oak and apple. Then you had lesser trees considered

“commoners of the wood.” There were strict rules and fines around cutting trees, or even pieces of trees. Even over 1,000 years ago.

By the 17th century however, the amount of Irish woodland was down to 7% because timber was a very valuable asset. Much of the woodlands were felled.

**Q. IRELAND HAS SUCH A DEEP HISTORY, DOES THAT COME INTO PLAY AS YOU SEEK OUT PLACES TO PRESERVE?**

We also work to find and identify the native woodlands that are left. We went to Co. Kerry and found a place called “Glannaguinity” which was being bulldozed and 10 acres of it had already been destroyed. We found it on the earliest military map of Munster from 1584. It was still on the map today. It was the last hiding place of the last free Gaelic lord and had a Celtic fort called “The Fort of the Wolves.” But it had never been protected, and today it is still not protected. We’re working to change things like that.

**Q. WHAT HAS THE COLLAPSE OF THE IRISH ECONOMY MEANT FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NATIVE WOODLAND?**

One of the problems we’ve had in the past is acquiring land in order to protect it. Ironically, Ireland’s economic troubles have created a unique window of opportunity for us with the collapse of land prices. We now can buy land, buy old forests that are in danger of being destroyed. Prices have come down as much as 90%. Land that was once €40,000 can be had for as little as €4,000. We can make a massive difference to conservation right now.

**Q. WHAT IS THE PLAN FOR A SITE LIKE THE ONE WE'RE WALKING NOW?**

Part of our plan for this site is to set up a nursery. Local schoolchildren and the local community can collect seeds, grow their own tree and plant it here. They can come back anytime to see “their” tree. This place belongs to the community. In even just five years’ time you’re going to see 15 feet tall birch trees interspersed with Scots pine and mountain ash.

When you’re down to 1/10 of 1% of your woodlands, at one point do you say “no more?” We can certainly put an economic value on the woodlands. But in the end, I believe we protect these spaces for their intrinsic value.

*Our supporters are preserving pieces of Ireland. Protection means that it will no longer be subject to destructive practices. There is so little left that to be able to say “I saved that for perpetuity” means it is a gift for generations to come.*

