



Issue 2: June, 2019: This e-bulletin is aimed at health professionals, consumers, growers, farmers, packers, processors, distributors, retailers, and others in the plant foods area.

History of Irish diet in plants

The UCD Bloom Garden at this year's Bord Bia event visually illustrated changes in the Irish diet that resulted from key societal and historical changes over the past 8,000 years. Professor Alexander Evans, Dean of Agriculture at UCD, provided the concept and a UCD team of Dr Caroline Elliott-Kingston (team leader), Dr Meriel McClatchie and four landscape architecture students - John McCord, Ciaran Rooney, Hannah Johnston and Niamh Conlan designed/assembled/planted the garden. The outcome was a Silver Gilt Medal Award in the Concept Garden category. The garden provided a 'plant continuum' over the five time periods listed below:

Early settlers (8000 years ago)

The featured plant in this section was the *water lily* as seeds of this plant have been recorded at archaeological excavations of Mesolithic sites in Ireland. The seeds are preserved because they were buried in waterlogged conditions or were charred which enabled their survival for thousands of years. Studies of indigenous peoples in North America have shown how the seeds were prepared for consumption. Capsules were gathered and fermented in water followed by cleaning, de-husking, winnowing, parching, grinding and roasting. This process took a minimum of two weeks. Alternatively, the seeds could be fried in fat to make a 'popcorn'.

First farmers (5700 years ago)

Emmer wheat was the plant featured in this section of the garden. The earliest archaeological evidence of farming in Ireland dates to almost 6000 years ago i.e. in the first centuries of the Neolithic period. New crops and animals arrived into Ireland including cattle, sheep and pigs. Grains and chaff of emmer wheat have been recorded at many archaeological excavations of Neolithic sites in Ireland. Emmer wheat is closely related to modern bread wheats but is a hulled wheat with strong husks. The grains can be ground into bread flours, boiled as porridges/stews or malted to ale. The bread had a nuttier taste than today's conventional wheat breads.

Medieval traders (800 years ago)

The medieval period in Ireland began in the 12th century and signalled a period of huge increase in people trading foods. *Fat Hen* is the featured plant in the garden of this period. Its leaves were sold by hawkers in Dublin as a vegetable until the 18th century and it was consumed following boiling as for spinach. Its seeds could be eaten much like its better known relative i.e. quinoa. Today's gardeners recognise Fat Hen as an annoying weed.

Industrial society (200 years ago)

Increasing industrialisation and urbanisation have had a profound effect on food in Ireland over the past few centuries and agriculture was the mainstay of the economy in early 19th century Ireland. *Potatoes* were the crop featured in this section of the garden. They were the key food for many people and much land was devoted to the crop to support a rapidly increasing population. Smallholders played an important role in potato production. Starch granule analysis is providing new pathways to understanding the role of this iconic food in Ireland's past. Any mention of the potato must be accompanied by reference to the Great Famine of the mid 1850s when the crop in Ireland failed resulting in starvation, disease/death and emigration of many of the citizens.

Modern day (21st century)

Nowadays the citizens of Ireland have access to a wide range of foods both home-grown and imported. At the rear of the UCD garden a modern day scene in a supermarket was shown reflecting the key role of large food retailers in many peoples' lives. *Chilli peppers* were the food featured in the garden to reflect the shift towards a more globalised diet. While chilli peppers can be grown indoors in Ireland most are imported. In recent years increased travel to/from Ireland has dramatically influenced and broadened food preferences. The modern Irish diet is now a combination of Irish produced foods and imported staples and exotics.

More information: More details of the UCD Bloom Garden are given below. The 2nd link details the Irish diet under six headings: (i) agriculture in Ireland, (ii) how do we know what people ate in the past? (iii) how do we know what people eat today? (iv) the modern Irish diet; (v) horticulture and our diet; (vi) food choices of today.

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