

# Report by Trainees Forum Synergies Scholarship Programme

21st September - 7th October 2019 - Donegal, Ireland



**Host:** OURganic Gardens, Joanne Butler

**Trainees (Authors):** Tom van Tilburg & Alexandra Fuß

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## 1 Profile

We, Tom and Alexandra, live in a rural village in a farmhouse, and want to start a small-scale organic farm or project. Further, we are engaged in various activities in the village as volunteer. We are already participated in some projects in our region (orchard and wine making).

After Alexandra studied organic agriculture (University Hohenheim, Msc) and rural development (University Wageningen, Bsc), she returned to the German countryside with her boyfriend Tom. They want to re-establish the farm of my grandparents. The idea is to create an organic market garden, producing vegetables and fruits for the inhabitants in the village and surrounding (e.g. restaurants, school, elderly home).



**Alexandra Fuss,**  
future farmer

**Germany,**  
registered: 04/2019  
last update: 05/05/2019



**Tom van Tilburg,**  
future farmer

**Germany,**

registered: 04/2019  
last update: 05/05/2019



Tom has a broad background from his studies at Wageningen University, The Netherlands (BSc in Land and water management (tropical agriculture) and MSc in Aquaculture and Marine resource management). He gained practical experience in Chili, Vietnam and Marco but is looking to get more involved in the practical field of sustainable rural development in our area in rural Germany.

We want to create synergies between the actors in the rural setting and market the products locally. During the training, we can bring my experiences from my studies and practical experiences from small vegetable growing and am looking forward to work hands-on in the field. We would like to learn more about professional vegetable growing and local marketing in other regions in Europe. In addition, the connection with the society and village is important to us and we are looking for innovative ideas how to engage the community in this process. We are hoping to exchange with interesting people during the training and at the European Rural Parliament.

## 2 Motivation

We would like to understand and exchange experience in sustainable rural development from our host. Our goal is to start a project ourselves but this will be much easier as we could learn from the ideas, mistakes and insights from others. The two pictures show our shed and garden which we want to develop further.



We are also interested in everything from the production, processing and marketing. Our focus is on organic or ecological production. We are still working on building our ideas for the future so this will be the best moment to participate in the program.



Our visit will not only be to consume knowledge but to exchange ideas and practices. During Tom's studies and for his personal interest he gathered a lot of knowledge related to agriculture and processing of products. Alexandra has studied and worked in different cultural settings and was keen to learn from others. She looked forward to do practical work for example on a vegetable farm or orchard.

The host OURganic Garden looked very interesting, as it was not only about organic production but also including the community actively. We were interested in what Joanne and the whole network is doing, we like that she is integrating education and food production. It was interesting for us to see how it looks and works in practice, as we also want to start a small-scale farm with a good connection to the local community.

As this training is about exchanging knowledge, we were willing to contribute to the project of the host in labour or with sharing ideas and knowledge.

### **3 Description of the activities carried out**

On Saturday 21st September 2019, we travelled from Dusseldorf, Germany, to Gortahork, Ireland. From the airplane we had a nice view of the landscape and were surprised how little forest there is on the island, we didn't know that forestry in Ireland is one of the aspects we will learn more about.

During the 16 days, we had various activities; we could join Joanne to all her meetings and could participate to permaculture courses. We will now highlight some of the activities carried out combined with quotes of local actors.

#### **3.1 Community gardens**

Joanne is president of the community garden network Ireland and still advises some communities on how to grow vegetables.

We have visited on project of a church community close to their house (Sunday 22 September):



We joined Joanne to her teaching/advice session at a new community garden (Wednesday 25 September). It was a men shed, were around 10 men come together and want to build things and grow food.

*"The local priest recommended this community garden project as I need to get a more healthier diet due to my diabetes"* @community garden

*"I grow my own vegetables as they definitely are more tasty as the supermarket one's"*  
@ community garden visit



### 3.2 Work in OURganic gardens

The plot size is 4 acres, about half of it is woodland, and another part is the garden area with two polytunnels, vegetable beds, apple orchard and a new designed fruit orchard, mainly with soft fruit.



Every day, we spent time in the garden, to observe, harvest, water, seed or do other works. We have learned new techniques, which are typical for Ireland like the lazy beds or using seaweed as an organic fertilizer. It was also interesting for us to see how Joanne applies the now dig principle.

We appreciated very much that we had the possibility to read books on no-dig, permaculture and agroforestry; this was a good addition to the practical work.

### 3.3 Collecting Seaweed

We have collected seaweed two times; we used it for the lazy beds and as fertilizer for one vegetable bed. It will stay in the bed and decompose directly there, by spring it all should be composted so that the bed can be used for planting again.





### 3.4 Lazy Beds



*"Digging lazy beds for growing plants is the opposite of a relaxing activity"* @Ouganic gardens during voluntary day.

The method of lazy beds is an old traditional way to break up grassland for food production, mainly potatoes. The idea is to turn the soil and flip it over to the bed, in between is seaweed. The idea is to suppress weeds, the trenches should channel the water and avoid to moist soil. In addition, this slight hilly bed will warm up quicker in spring so it can be used for early crops.

Joanne wanted to use this method to reintegrate traditional Irish farming practices and teach people about it. At the permaculture course, all participants joined to create two beds. On the volunteer day, we also made one bed.

### 3.5 Making apple juice

Small-scale & low-tech apple juice production in Donegal, with old apple varieties. Making juice or cider is a good way to preserve the apples, especially windfalls and apples with scratch. Tasting the juice and sharing it with the community is a nice opportunity to celebrate the end of this year's harvest.



*"This apple juice is tasty; did we just make this from our own apples?"*

@OURganic gardens, apple harvest and processing.

### 3.6 Permaculture courses

#### 3.6.1 OURganic Gardens on 28 and 29 September

During the weekend of 28 and 29 September, an introduction to permaculture design took place at OURganic gardens. Twelve people participated in this course, we were lucky that we also could join.

During the course, the main elements of permaculture design were discussed: observation, permaculture principles, soil management, water cycles, and first designs of people's own projects. It was a good combination of inside classes and practical experiences on the diverse site of OURganic gardens.

We have gained insights in the basis of permaculture and how it can be used when designing a garden, but also in construction or other systems. Tom realised and got deeper understanding in the natural environment and the translation thereof to the design of a forest garden. Alexandra got inspired by the various examples and initiatives the people had. Both got excited to start drawing out their own design of a forest garden, which could be started in around 2 years.

In the course the rainwater harvesting system of OURganic gardens was presented, this should be adapted to the local conditions:

*"We can harvest a million litres of water per year from our roof" @Permaculture course.*



*"A conservation mind-set is a desperate hope" @Permaculture course, explained some participant.*

As he/she believed that, the current nature conservation policy in Ireland needs a shift and change.

### 3.6.2 In Derry on 5 October

The course in Derry had a specific focus on a project of a public garden. The walled garden was re-established, people from the area wanted to take part to shape and design the space.

We participated on the first day to learn how Permaculture can be applied in such a specific case with specific needs, taking all different people and needs into account. Further it was very valuable for us to see the preparation of the course and learn more how to teach and organise courses on gardening. Joanne was one of the two teachers and shared her knowledge in gardening with the participants. She is already very experienced in teaching in front of diverse groups, we learned how she was explaining complex process in an easy to understand way (e.g. crop rotation).



*"We are in a declared climate and biodiversity crisis" @Permaculture course Derry*

*"Permaculture is a common knowledge pool where everyone can put in/take out what they need" @Permaculture course Derry*

Additionally the time in Derry was for us an opportunity to see the closest big city to Gortahork, it was interesting to see the difference between the rural areas and the lifestyle in the city. Further, we have got more insight in the history of Northern Ireland and talked to people about the possible impact of Brexit.

Though the participation to the course and the stay in Derry was not intended in the work plan beforehand, we appreciated it very much, learned many new things, and got a deeper understanding in the rural-urban relationships, as well as politics in Europe.

## 4 Assessment

From our point of view, the role and impact of activities learned on sustainable rural development are broad. We have listed here the key aspects that we have grasped within the two weeks period.

- **Permaculture** knowledge can be shared with the community at their site as a local hands-on consultant. This is however time consuming due to the traveling time in rural areas. Having a community garden or display area near your home reduces your travel time and increases the possibilities for further activities like training and sell of vegetables.
- It is inspiring to see the **joy and mental wellbeing** spread by gardening and the gratitude for knowledge transfer within this very open community. If you love what you are doing and want to share this, enthusiasts will come to join you on your journey. This can be either volunteers or paying visitors.
- The **administration** is also there and can also be time consuming, unnecessarily complex, unexpected expensive (insurance, organic certification, building legislation for commercial buildings). There is no illusion that you will only spend time on the things you will like to do. The communication and organisation side of the business/activities is the basis of success. Big investments of time are needed for a smooth operation and sufficient customers. The financing of it all can be either personal or via governmental funding. The latter give you restrictions but also creates opportunities for integration into networks from which you can also get benefits (research projects, regional community groups, eg.)

## 5 Interviews

We have interviewed Hannah Mole who is a Permaculture Designer and taught the Permaculture course at OURganic Gardens (28 & 29 September 2019). She was very inspiring and has a broad experience in designing gardens and lives herself in a rural area.

Further, we have interviewed Rob who is very active in the local community and is a volunteer at OURganic garden. He has a broad network in the area and is very active in various community projects.

### 5.1 Hannah Mole - Teacher/Facilitator at Permaculture Course

*How can Permaculture contribute to rural development?*

Permaculture is restoring landscape and can add value to rural areas, so that locals can appreciate their area again. The root of permaculture is the value of the place.

Further, in permaculture you are producing local food, which is of benefit.

The restoration of the ecosystem leads to healthy water cycles, plants and soil.

Additionally permaculture reconnect people with their land or area.



*What is important to consider when starting with a permaculture garden?*

It is important to take time and observe the area and land, how does the sun move, where is the water going when there is heavy rainfall, where are strong winds, where are the frost pockets, and so on.

In addition, getting data on rainfall or soil is helpful, it might be online available.

Use books and read more about permaculture and what suits for your area considering the planting.

However, many other systems exist permaculture is only on concept; the holistic management is another approach.

It really depends on your needs.

*What have you seen are common mistakes to avoid?*

I have seen that people do not put enough time in the design. It is important to also pay attention to the details and include them in the design.

Not understanding natural systems e.g. water flows.

The mind shift in aesthetics can be difficult, as you work with nature you have to adapt your wishes to the site not to, for example where to dig the pond.

## 5.2 Robert Wasson - Local volunteer at OURganic gardens

*When did you start vegetable gardening?*

I started gardening about 4-5 years ago. I was familiar with the inspiring and rewarding effects of gardening from my previous job as a teacher at a school for kids with special needs. I started as a DIY volunteer at my local community garden building a shed. I got more and more interested in the plant aspect as well.

*What do you think is the most important aspect of community gardens?*

The most important aspect of community gardens is that people from different background meet up and work besides each other. A lot of knowledge about different aspects of gardening is shared within these groups.

*How does this strengthens your local rural area?*

Our community garden group visits other community garden groups in our local area. We learn a lot about sustainability and how to implement this in our own lives, this knowledge is especially present in the older generation (66+). It is good thing that this is shared with the younger generation.

*What would you like to see changed in the future*

Extend of the opening hours of my local community garden as this is restricted to one morning a week. In my opinion this shared resource can be more widely used by the community.

Personally, I would like more land for personal tree nursery with deer protection.

*Why did you volunteer at OURganic gardens*

The place is vibrant with diverse people and projects. There is a lot of education and knowledge available. It is a beautiful location to perform any activity.

*What do you think is meant by sustainable rural development?*

In Donegal (local area); rural communities are because of unemployment; lack of governmental help; have to find alternative ways to grow their own food.

"We have to look at alternative ways to live as we do not have the same possibilities as the people in the cities"

## 6 Lessons learned

We have gained a lot of new ideas and insights on how to start and run a business in a rural area. One of our motivations to go to OURganic Garden was that we wanted to see how they are integrating the local community in their business.

Here is a list of the most important lessons we have learned:

- Permaculture design principles and ideas
  - to use small and slow solutions (permaculture principle Nr. 9) in all parts, e.g. to start with a small business and then expand the things which work best
  - use and value of diversity (permaculture principle Nr. 10) also in all parts, regarding planting in the garden it should be for various reasons diverse, but also in the business it is helpful to have a broad network and different opportunities to generate an income, further it all should be balanced with the private live (family). We saw that vegetable production on itself was not enough to support the family. However, the vegetable garden was essential in the courses and events organized on site.
- that trial and error is allowed and important in finding your own path and defining your business, sometimes, maybe more in a rural area it is important to adapt to the local needs, these needs might not be obvious in the beginning

*"We have to look at alternative ways to live as we do not have the same possibilities as the people in the cities"* @local actor on volunteer day



## 7 Action Plan

During our stay in the permaculture course we got some tools how to start on your own project. We have to observe our field to know which natural characteristics of sun, wind and slope are present. During the course, we already started to design one of our field as a forest garden. This land might be available for us in the near future and we want to develop this idea further on how to establish our ideas.

Therefore, we might take the wintertime to develop a future vision on how we want plant the land and what kind of opportunities this can create for our local community and us. This will be part of our business plan. We will also register as a part-time business so we can start while continuing with our jobs until it might pay-off to focus only on our own business.

We need to start gathering more detailed information/experience about possible plants and plant guilds from local tree nurseries, local gardeners and local species test.

Further, we have gained so much more insights in permaculture that influences us in the restoration of our house, planning the vegetable garden, or even in our relationship with each other. These insights are taken into action continuously and we already started in the garden by using the cardboard as a mulch.

Another long-term idea is to develop a place to share knowledge, process products and connect to the local community:

1. To develop processing and products based on old knowledge in the region and future trends
2. Find a suitable location (conversion own outbuildings, use local community centre)
3. To investigate the option for knowledge transfer
  - a. Production, maintenance and propagation of the plants within our agroforestry system (workshops, day events, local volunteers)
  - b. Processing (Food Lab experimental centre, workshops, day events, local volunteers)

We are very grateful that we could participate in the Forum Synergies project and gain insights and ideas from OURganic Gardens. It helped a lot to see and hear the experiences from Joanne to develop our own ideas further. As they are located in a very rural area, it was good to see how she is bringing in new ideas on how to bring people to the garden and spread the word about permaculture.

We are thankful that Joanne and her family opened their doors for us and shared their life with us. We appreciated that they were so open and that we could exchange about everything. We have learned more and got more ideas than we expected.



*"Find your Donegal roots at Ourganic gardens"  
@OURganic gardens*