

centre, as well as to ring in the changing seasons. Visitors to the village are encouraged to follow a nature walk, which takes in Ballon's 'native planted walkway' or 'Sli an Dulra', a peaceful, pedestrianised route enclosed by steep banks planted with mainly native species. Many of the plants growing here were propagated by locals as a result of plant and seed swap days held in the village over the years and it's now home to many mature trees and shrubs including elder, birch, blackthorn, hazel, spindle and guelder rose.

The importance of native species such as willow, blackthorn, hazel, elderberry, ash, field maple, alder, rowan and silver birch in providing habitats for native birds and insect life also prompted the community to plant more than 1,500 native hedging plants around the village as well as to create a native tree trail, which was sponsored by Town and Villages renewal scheme. Beautifully marked with handsome, cast-metal signs designed by a Kilkenny artist, it is yet another example of how this group has succeeded in skillfully joining the dots in terms of promoting sustainability at community level.

So is the mini-wildflower survey undertaken with the help of nearby Altamont Garden's head gardener Paul Cutler. Focusing on just one laneway in Ballon village, it identifies seventy-two different flowering plants that grow there, from dog's violets and celandines to dog roses and bluebells. A celebration of the rich diversity of plant life that's often right our noses, photographs of every plant found were taken by local photographer Michael Martin and can be viewed on the village website as well as on a handsomely designed display in the village, along with the exhortation to cherish all the natural beauty to which Ballon is home.

Supported by Carlow County Council as well as TUS, this tight-knit local community's hard work and commitment to greening up their village has been recognized with a slew of awards, including as overall winners, twice, of Carlow County Council's 'Pride of Place' award, Glor na Gael's Natural Heritage & Biodiversity award, the EPA's 'Waste Prevention Award' and the Tidy Town's Community Climate Change Action Award. But as well-deserved and as greatly appreciated as these are, without doubt the greatest reward for the people of Ballon has been the way this rural community has transformed its local environment in a myriad of practical, planet-friendly ways, the benefits of which will be felt long into the future. ■



Left to right: Alyn Ainsworth, Sharon Deacon, Leah Barron, Lauren Kelly and Ella Pender pricking out seedlings