

Located in the heart of rural Carlow, the pretty village of Ballon is known for the outstanding beauty of its local landscape and its ancient history. Nearby Ballon Hill has several significant archaeological sites dating right back to the Bronze Age, and there is a remarkably strong sense of community and civic pride shared by residents. How many Irish villages, for example, can boast of having two of their very own community orchards, filled with young apple, pear and plum trees planted by volunteers? Or of something as innovative as Ballon's volunteer-run community shop, 'An Siopa Glas', where any surplus produce from the village's orchards as well as its school community garden, is sold with all profits channeled back into the community via the Ballon Improvement group?

Even the many different areas of ornamental, pollinator-friendly planting growing along the village's main street are as a direct result of local community effort, as is its handsomely-signed native tree walk and the lovingly planted village walkway that intersects its sleepy streets. So is the new garden situated on the edges of the village, which commemorates the 1916 Easter Rising and takes the form of seven roughly-hewn standing granite stones surrounding a young hazel tree, each carved with symbolic words from the 1916 proclamation — 'freedom', 'strength', 'equal rights', 'civil liberty', 'sovereignty', 'independence' and 'exaltation'.

At the heart of this very impressive community growing and greening project is a tight-knit, extremely hard-working, committed group of local people, who together form the Ballon Improvement Group. Heading it up as chairperson is Máire George, a self-described 'blow-in' from Kerry, who has lived with her family in the village for many decades. A very keen gardener, Máire has been an important part of the driving force in greening up this rural Carlow village over the last decade. "I've been so lucky in life in terms of having a very happy family life and establishing a very successful business with my husband Jim, now run by our son Padraic."



Kyle Abbey, Eoin Raleigh and James Dowling tend to young transplants



Kathleen Abbey and her grandsons Ryan Abbey, Kyle Abbey and Tadgh Abbey working together in Ballon community garden



Kyle Abbey helping out in the community garden

"So I feel very strongly that it's really important to give something back. I've always loved gardening — growing up in Kerry, my father was a very keen gardener and he passed that passion on to me. But my love of plants aside, the therapeutic power of gardening is something that's always interested me, from the way it can provide relief from stress and a sense of accomplishment to the health-enhancing qualities of homegrown organic fruit and vegetables. Gardening at a community level seemed the perfect way for me to get involved." Helping her every inch of the way is the committee, whose members include Eileen Murphy, Breda Wray, Bernie Mullins, Mary Jordan, Kathleen Abbey, Michael Martin, and Paul Cutler.