



Left to right: John Dowling, Máire George, Shane Raleigh, Leah Barron, Ella Pender and Lauren Kelly in the polytunnel, for a 'taste test' of heritage carrots varieties



Kitty Dowling helping to harvest carrots

First on their list was the creation of Ballon's community garden, which the group began work on back in 2009. Originally this was situated in the front garden of local publican Paul Kavanagh, a temporary solution until they found a more permanent site for it at the front of the new extension to the local primary school, St Peter and Paul's. Almost everything used in this compact but productive space has been donated or ingeniously upcycled, from the unused precast septic tank donated by a local firm that now serves as a raised planter to the old floorboards and wooden pallets used to build its raised beds. Even its bird-boxes were made and donated by local company Cheetah Electronics while a small polytunnel, funded under Agenda 21 situated to one end of the garden is the perfect place to propagate seedlings and protect more tender plants during the colder months.

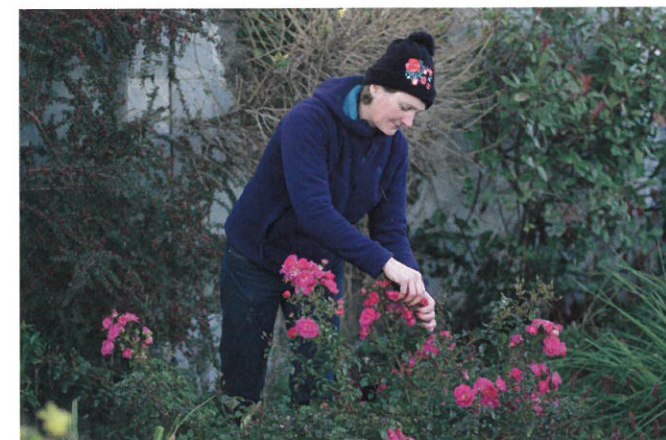
This also serves as a rainproof outdoor classroom for pupils of the school, who use the space regularly under the enthusiastic guidance of assistant principal Bernie Mullins. Together they grow a range of food crops, many of them heritage varieties grown from seed sourced from the Organic Centre in Leitrim. "While the space now doubles up as a school garden,



Máire George and Eileen Murphy, committee members of Ballon Improvement Group

it's still very much a community garden that's used and cared for by many members of the local community. We all help to look after it and to harvest the produce during the summer months when the children are on holidays. Anything surplus goes down to Siopa Glas to be sold, with the money raised then pumped back into other green projects that are to the benefit of everyone living in the village." Along with Ballon's Community Centre, Siopa Glas also acts as a sort of social hub and a place to teach and learn new skills. Examples include regular seed and plant swaps plus a recent 'juicing workshop' held there to demonstrate how fresh fruit from the community orchard could be put to great use.

Situated along the village road just outside the school are other generous areas of ornamental planting designed by the group not just to beautify the village but also as part of an overall biodiversity plan, 'Dúlra Bhalana', sponsored by the Heritage Council to promote the notions of sustainable living, environmentalism and nature-based education. Tended by local people with the recent part-time assistance, one day a week during the summer, of two professional gardeners, these do much to beautify the approach road to the village



Annemarie O' Leary, one of two professional gardeners who help out during the busy season