

David Dowd

Senior Lecturer of Horticulture
College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)
Greenmount, United Kingdom

David Dowd is the Senior Lecturer responsible for Higher Education Horticulture at the College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise, Northern Ireland. David studied for his Degree in Horticulture at the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin and at the Dublin, Institute of Technology for his Master's in Sustainable Development. David is currently overseeing the development of CAFRE as the regional hub for the distribution of seeds and seedlings to GLH partners in the United Kingdom.

Tell us a bit about yourself and how you got involved with horticulture and nature.

I have worked at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) in Northern Ireland since 2012 and am now the Course Director responsible for Higher Education Horticulture. My professional journey in horticulture started when I completed a Degree in Horticulture at the National Botanic Gardens, Dublin, Ireland and then progressed to a Masters in Sustainable Development at the Dublin Institute of Technology. I worked in historic gardens before taking up a lecturing role at CAFRE. My current job is an interesting mixture of higher education management, including developing and introducing a new Horticulture degree at CAFRE, managing horticultural projects on the campus estate and regularly liaising with industry.

My initial interest in horticulture came from working in my father's vegetable garden. Growing your own food was something I took for granted but I now have a great appreciation of all the knowledge and skills I gained tending to those vegetables. My uncle was a professional gardener so I was always aware of horticulture as a career. I volunteered with a nature conservation organisation for a number of years and really enjoyed working on environmental projects and it was then that I decided to embark on a career in Horticulture.

I have had so many great experiences and have met many fascinating people who are passionate about what they do. I work with a great team of people and together we carry out the important work of ensuring that there are new generations of horticulturists with the knowledge and skills that are so necessary for success in the industry.



How did you learn about Hiroshima's hibaku jumoku? Please tell us a little about how your partnership with Green Legacy Hiroshima started.

I learnt about the Green Legacy Hiroshima project from a BBC Radio documentary broadcast in May 2020. We had been in lockdown due to Covid-19 for a couple of months and the project's message of hope was something that I felt would resonate with staff and students at CAFRE. Having researched the project, I applied on behalf of the college to become a partner organisation. Greenmount Campus has well qualified horticultural staff and excellent horticultural facilities so I knew that we would be able to take on the long term responsibility of nurturing and growing these remarkable trees. We were delighted to have been accepted as a partner organisation and since then our relationship with GLH has continued to grow.

What does the presence of hibaku jumoku saplings at CAFRE mean for the school, for the faculty and students, and also for you personally?

We are delighted to be the first organisation in Northern Ireland to receive hibaku jumoku seeds. Within the courses we teach, our students learn about the significant contributions that plants make to our daily lives by improving our local environment, society and economy. CAFRE also recognises the importance of developing our students' sense of being global citizens.

Before the seeds arrived from Japan we invited Nassrine Azimi and Yuko Baba from GLH to speak to our students about the GLH project via a video conference call. They spoke eloquently about the history of the trees and what they mean to the people of Hiroshima and also partners around the world. Nassrine and Yuko shared images of the actual trees from which our seeds came. This talk helped to bring a terrible event that is difficult to comprehend to a level that allowed us to appreciate how incredible it is that these trees survived and how special they are. An email I received from one of our students after the talk illustrates what the project means to our students:

'The Hiroshima Green Legacy lecture was so inspiring and is a bright beacon of hope for our class. It is amazing that something beautiful like nurturing seeds into saplings and planting trees with a message of peace in Northern Ireland comes from the chaos of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Unlike previous generations, the age profile of our class means we are studying at CAFRE during a time of peace. We are aware that students in Afghanistan do not have the luxury that we do now. Thank you from our whole Horticulture class for applying to be a partner of the Green Legacy programme.'

From an educational perspective the seeds also provide our students with the opportunity to experience how to successfully germinate seeds from a variety of plant species that they would not be that familiar with in Northern Ireland. They have also learnt about the process involved in importing plant materials in terms of plant health and phytosanitary controls. We were delighted when GLH asked us to be a UK regional hub for the distribution of seeds and seedlings to other partners. Going forwards with this will give our students the experience of packaging and sending plants around the United Kingdom.

What do you think of this connection made through hibaku jumoku? What are the keys to successfully nurture the saplings in the UK?

Being in contact with other partner organisations has been and will be a real highlight of the GLH project. It is fantastic to be part of a community of partners involved in growing these inspirational plants. We have a highly skilled team of horticulturists here at CAFRE who are happy to share their knowledge and we look forward to learning from the experience of others.



CAFRE students planting Ginkgo biloba seeds



Ginkgo biloba seedlings

Our seeds arrived in perfect condition from the Hiroshima Botanic Gardens. We used a controlled environment growing cabinet to break their dormancy and have had an excellent germination rate. The temperate climate in the UK is relatively similar to Hiroshima so the Ginkgo and the Oriental plane we received will grow very successfully in Northern Ireland.

What is your vision for these saplings at CAFRE in the future? And how does the unfolding of COVID-19 influence horticulture and nature in general, and the hibaku jumoku in particular?

We plan to plant a number of the trees and shrubs on our campus grounds where they will have a special place in our plant collection. Students often learn something of the history of a plant species when learning to identify them. The hibaku jumoku are different because our students will be in contact with a living piece of history. It is wonderful to know that future generations of young horticulturists will be inspired by the hibaku jumoku.

The COVID-19 pandemic has meant that people are spending more time at home and there has been an increase in interest in horticulture and nature. I think the hibaku jumoku can also be interpreted as symbols of the need to protect the environment. These trees have much to teach us about the regenerative power of nature, the importance of working for peace and the need for hope even in the most difficult times such as we are experiencing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

How will the message of peace of the survivor trees be shared with your community?

We have had some radio media coverage and have an active website that follows the seedlings development. The plants will have a commemorative plaque to explain their significance and will be shown to the campus's many visitors. We also plan to reach out to new partners in our community and eventually share trees with them. Already we have been contacted by organisations interested in receiving young trees so we can look forward to planting ceremonies in the coming years.