

SBN Green Flag for Biodiversity, 31-05-2018

My name is Marcia D'Alton.

Some of you know me; others don't. I used to live in Monkstown and 3 of my 5 children spent some very happy years in Scoil Barra Naofa. I was a member of the Green Committee when you were going for your first flag on waste and my eldest son was a member of the Committee when you were going for your second flag on energy. So I am hugely excited to be here this morning for the massive achievement of your fifth flag for biodiversity.

I am a county councillor. Some day if you like I can come back and talk to you about all the different aspects of a county councillor's job but for me, the essence of what I do boils down to one thing: helping to make people happier while helping to make where we live nicer.

Because the nicer our surroundings, the happier we are.

You know the way you feel when you stop and listen, really listen to the birds singing early in the morning? That amazing wow feeling you get?

Or when you run through a field of long grass and feel the wind in your hair and it makes you feel so happy you could fly?

Or when you're walking in a shady forest with the leaves rustling far above you in the canopy of the trees and that lovely peaceful feeling comes over you?

You see, being in nature makes us happy. Sometimes we forget that because there are so many other distractions. But deep deep down, that's the way we humans are programmed. And that's one of the most reasons it is so important to keep nature all around us.

Nature is so clever. She keeps hundreds and thousands and millions of animals and plants and insects and fungi and all the places they live balanced so they all work together. The only species that can really upset that balance is man. Us. And that's really dumb of us because we need nature to survive.

Most of the food we eat comes from 12 plant species. But farmers couldn't successfully grow those plants without the earthworms who aerate the soil, the bees who fertilise the crops and a vast network of hundreds of other little creatures.

Plants provide the basis of so many of our modern medicines. Some of you may have asthma. One of the common medicines used to treat asthma comes from the cacao tree. Japanese knotweed is a plant that was imported from Japan over 100 years ago that is now

growing out of control in many places in Ireland. But even Japanese knotweed has resveratrol in it. That's the basis of a drug used to treat arthritis.

Plants themselves are medicines. Dandelions, those wonderful cheeky yellow flowers that are such amazing early food for bees, are bursting with vitamins and are a super treatment for kidneys. Mint helps digestion. Sage makes a tea that is amazing for helping with sore throats. How many of you love nettles? Well, apart from being a wonderful home for butterflies, nettles actually are a medicine. They can treat skin conditions like eczema, bronchitis, inflammation and they make a really yummy soup.

We need plants to clean our air and to deliver us the oxygen we breathe. We need plants to help control flooding. We need fungi and a whole range of living things to make clean, healthy soil. Without soil, we'd be nothing. Can you imagine a world without soil?

Actually, soil is so important that in some countries, gardening is used to help people who are struggling with mental health. There are microbes in the soil – tiny creatures that are so small you cannot see them with your naked eye. When we handle them and breathe them in, they boost the production of serotonin in our bodies. Serotonin is basically our internal happy chemical.

What you have done in earning this green flag for biodiversity has been so important. You have thought about biodiversity, you have spoken about it, you have watched it all around you and you have tried to make the school a more welcoming place for biodiversity.

Do me a favour though? As you grow older and on into secondary school and beyond, never forget that all living things and the places they live work together as the nuts and bolts of nature. We humans are part of that working together, that balance. Yet we are the only species that is powerful enough to upset it. Please never forget that each of us has a huge responsibility to respect and preserve nature's balance. That is the clever thing to do because it keeps us safe, healthy, happy and fed.

Congratulations to you all on being awarded this wonderful flag. Congratulations to your teachers and a special congratulations to the leadership of Miss Flannery and your Green Schools Committee.