

Three Garments — Make · Grow · Know

A talk for Wild Bee Week

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Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for having me. My name is Jane Fraher, and I'm here from The Three Sisters Women's Shed.

Most people have heard of a Men's Shed by this stage — a place a man can go to be around other men, to potter, to make something. A Women's Shed is the very same idea. It's somewhere to go. Somewhere you're expected, somewhere there's a cup of tea and a bit of company and something to do with your hands.

We settled on the name fairly recently — we'd decided to rebrand, and we wanted something that said we were from Waterford without just saying “Waterford.” Something with a bit more to it than that. We wanted it to speak to connection, and to the strength of women together. So we became The Three Sisters. Because The Three Sisters are our three rivers: the Barrow, the Nore and the Suir. And Waterford is the place where the three of them meet. That felt like exactly the right thing to name ourselves after — three that come together and become something bigger where they meet, without any one of them stopping being itself.

A place like ours looks like it's all about the sewing. We have the machines, we have the fabric, we make things and we mend things. But the making isn't really the point of it. The making is the reason to be in the room. What it's actually for is company. It's for the woman who's on her own more than she'd like to be. It's for knowing that on a certain morning of the week, there's somewhere you belong and people who'll notice if you don't turn up. The sewing is the excuse. The being together is the thing.

Now, I should own up to something straight away. I'm not going to teach you a single practical thing about a bee. I'm not an ecologist. I don't keep

bees. So you might well be wondering what on earth a women's shed is doing up here talking at Wild Bee Week. You're not the only one — so was I. But there's a reason I ended up here, and it starts with something we've been trying to make. So let me tell you what we're at.

We'd an idea for a project, and we call it Three Garments — Make, Grow, Know. And the idea behind it is a simple one. Over the course of it, people would learn to make three garments — a pair of trousers, a shirt, and a dress. Get those three under your belt, pardon the pun, and you've the makings of a wardrobe, and the confidence to mend what you already have instead of throwing it out. And the three words after it — make, grow, know — are the three strands of the whole thing. The making and the mending. The growing — a dye garden, with a local partner. And the knowing — talks about fast fashion and what it really costs, the waste of it, the emissions, the whole throwaway concept.

We put that idea to the Local Environmental Action Fund.

[TO FILL IN — funding outcome: we're still waiting to hear]

So it was the dye garden that brought me to your door, in a manner of speaking. We'll hopefully be growing one — a garden to colour the cloth, real colour, grown locally, instead of chemicals out of a bottle. But when we looked at the plants we'd need, we realised they were the very same plants the pollinators want. The flowers that give us our yellows and our oranges are the flowers the bees are working all summer long. And that's when it struck me — that we'd this great resource right here in Waterford I hadn't even known about, the National Biodiversity Data Centre. So I got in touch. Because if we were going to plant some flowers, we wanted them being the right things, grown the right way, doing two jobs at the one time. And one thing led to another — which, if you're still wondering what a women's shed is doing at Wild Bee Week, is how I ended up standing in front of you.

And we'd be growing it with one partner: Top of the City Garden, over on Barrack Street. I should tell you about them, because they're the ones

who'd actually be growing our colour. Top of the City Garden is up on Barrack Street — which, if you know it, is about the most built-up corner of the city. Very few trees, no green space nearby. And the ground it sits on has a history. It was a military site once — an old gun platform, a place where they stored cannons back in the eighteen-hundreds, tucked in between the inner and outer walls of the old Artillery Barracks. And then it was just left. Derelict — not touched, they reckon, since 1939. Overgrown waste ground that everyone walked past.

And then one day, a person stopped instead of walking by. It began with a single email to the Council — one person's notion that an unused piece of land didn't have to stay that way. And then the community followed: volunteers cleared it by hand through the first lockdown. And now — ground that once held cannons is growing apple and pear trees and a herb garden, with hens, and an insect pond going in. A place that once stored weapons is a place that now feeds bees.

And that's why they're the right partner for us, The Three Sisters Women's Shed. Because the whole idea of that garden is the same idea as the whole of what we do. A piece of ground that could have been left to go to waste — and instead it's growing food, and flowers, and now maybe the colour for our cloth. Nothing let go to waste. Which is exactly what we say about a worn coat, or a length of old fabric. You don't throw it out. You see what's still in it, and you make it into the next thing. They do it with ground. We do it with cloth. It's the very same instinct.

And here's what sits underneath the whole thing. If we're honest, a lot of climate action has been built for people who already have the means for it — and who already see themselves in the conversation. Not everyone can go out and buy an electric car. But everyone can mend a coat. Everyone can grow a flower, or pass on something they know how to do. And that kind of knowledge — how to make, how to mend, how to grow — has always lived in communities like ours. It's just rarely been counted as climate action at all. Our project says it does count.

Now — those plants, and the bees. The plants we'd be growing do two things at once. They'll eventually colour the cloth, and in the meantime, they feed the pollinators. Same flower, both jobs. The dye plants — the weld, the coreopsis, the marigolds — are flowers the bees love, while we'd take our colour from them. However, it's the plants our cloth comes from that I keep coming back to.

Take hemp. Hemp makes no nectar at all — nothing sweet, nothing to draw them in. But it flowers late in the summer, when everything else has gone over and the bees are hungry, and just then it offers them pollen, at the very moment the cupboard's otherwise bare. Then there's madder, which gives us red. But madder keeps its red down in the root, and it offers the bee no flower to speak of. What it offers instead is cover, and shelter, and the quiet undisturbed ground around it — which is exactly where the burrowing bees make their homes. And then there's flax — the plant we get our linen from. Flax doesn't need the bee at all. It sees to itself. And yet when its little blue flowers open, it still hands out a bit of pollen to whatever happens by. It gives, without being asked.

Not one of those plants stands alone. They're all mutually dependent — that's what symbiotic means. Each one does its bit so the next one can do theirs. And it's the very same in the shed. We all have to turn up. We all have to do our best to make the shed what it is. The plants do it, nature does it, we do it — everyone doing their own small part so the next part can be done.

And here's the thing I've come to think. We nearly always talk about sustainability as a scientific one — measuring things, counting species, getting the numbers right. And it is that, and thank goodness there are people who do it. But I don't think that's the whole of it. Because to sustain a thing just means to hold it up, over time, so it doesn't drop. And that's as true of people as it is of a meadow. You sustain a friendship. You sustain a place, by showing up to it, year after year, when nothing dramatic is happening. And keeping a relationship going over time is a thing ordinary people already know how to do. You don't need a degree

in it.

We get one big thing wrong about it, though — and we get it wrong about community, and about nature too. We think the goal is oneness.

Everybody the same, everything harmonious, all of it blended together into one smooth thing. And it isn't. A healthy bit of ground is not one plant. It's a mess of different things, all needing each other, none of them the same, none of them in charge. Pull it towards sameness and you kill it. The difference isn't the problem to be solved. The difference is the thing that makes it alive.

There's a philosopher I've been reading, Marina Garcés — and she has a line I keep coming back to: that you can bring what's separate together without making it all the same. I'm no philosopher, but when I read that I thought, well, that's *The Three Sisters*. That's the hedgerow. That's the bee and the flower. She'd put words on the thing I'd been looking at all along.

Because *The Three Sisters* works for the same reason a hedgerow works. We come from different places. We don't all share a first language — there's a good bit of pointing, and laughing, and holding a thing up to show what you mean. And nobody gave anything up to be there. Nobody dropped their own language, or their own way of doing a stitch, or where they're from. We didn't melt into one big happy sameness. If anything we stayed exactly as different as we came in. Lots of different things, kept in relationship, over time. Not one thing — many things, leaning on each other. Just like an ecosystem. Just like nature.

Which brings me back to the bees — because I can't stand up at Wild Bee Week and not give them a mention or two of their own. Think about what a bee and a flower are to each other. Even the ones that depend on each other entirely — the bee never becomes the flower, and the flower never becomes the bee. They stay two separate things, with a gap between them that never closes. And the whole of it works across that gap — they even talk to each other across it.

And here's a bit of science I've loved from the moment I first heard it, many years ago now. It still stops me. It's the kind of small, quiet detail that turns out to hold the whole world in it — the sort of thing that shows you how connected nature really is, how nothing in it stands on its own. A flower carries a tiny electric charge, and a bee carries its own. And when a bee has taken the nectar from a flower, the flower's charge shifts — just for a minute or two. And the next bee coming along can pick that change up, and reads it plain as day: this one's empty, someone's just been, move on. Two separate things, a gap between them that never closes — and still, something passes across it.

The distance isn't a failure. It's the design. Out of it, something gets made that neither could make alone — a bit of honey, a next generation of the plant, another spring.

So when one woman at that table shows another how to turn a hem, or set a sleeve, or bring an old coat back to life, she isn't trading for it. She's handing on what she knows — because keeping it to herself was never the point of knowing it. And the woman who learns it holds it the same way in her turn, ready for the next pair of hands. A skill handed on isn't spent. It doesn't run down. Like so much in nature, it actually grows by being given away — the way a flower gives its nectar away, and is no poorer for it.

And that's the kind of sustainability nobody ever puts on a poster. It's a skill that outlives the woman who taught it. It's a friendship that holds because people keep turning up for it. It's a coat mended instead of binned, and the mending taught to somebody who'll teach it again. Grow it, make it, mend it, pass it on. That loop doesn't wear out. Just like nature.

So here's where I'll leave it. There's a feeling a lot of us carry around and don't say out loud — that it might already be too late. You hear it everywhere, once you start listening for it. The damage is done. The numbers are bad and getting worse. We had our chance and we missed

it, and the honest thing now is to brace ourselves. And I think that feeling is the most dangerous thing of all. Because if you believe it's too late, you stop. You stop planting. You stop turning up. You stop making things that take a season to come good — because why would you bother. The belief that it's over is the thing that makes it over.

And I don't believe it — not for the bees, and not for us. It's not too late as long as we keep planting. As long as we keep turning up. As long as there's a thing going in the ground, the bees will keep coming back to it. The bees never got the memo. They just keep turning up to the flowers. And the women in *The Three Sisters* never got it either. They just keep turning up to the table. That's the most hopeful thing I know.

Thank you.