

The People's Kitchen

Zine #2

Growing in Public Flower Beds





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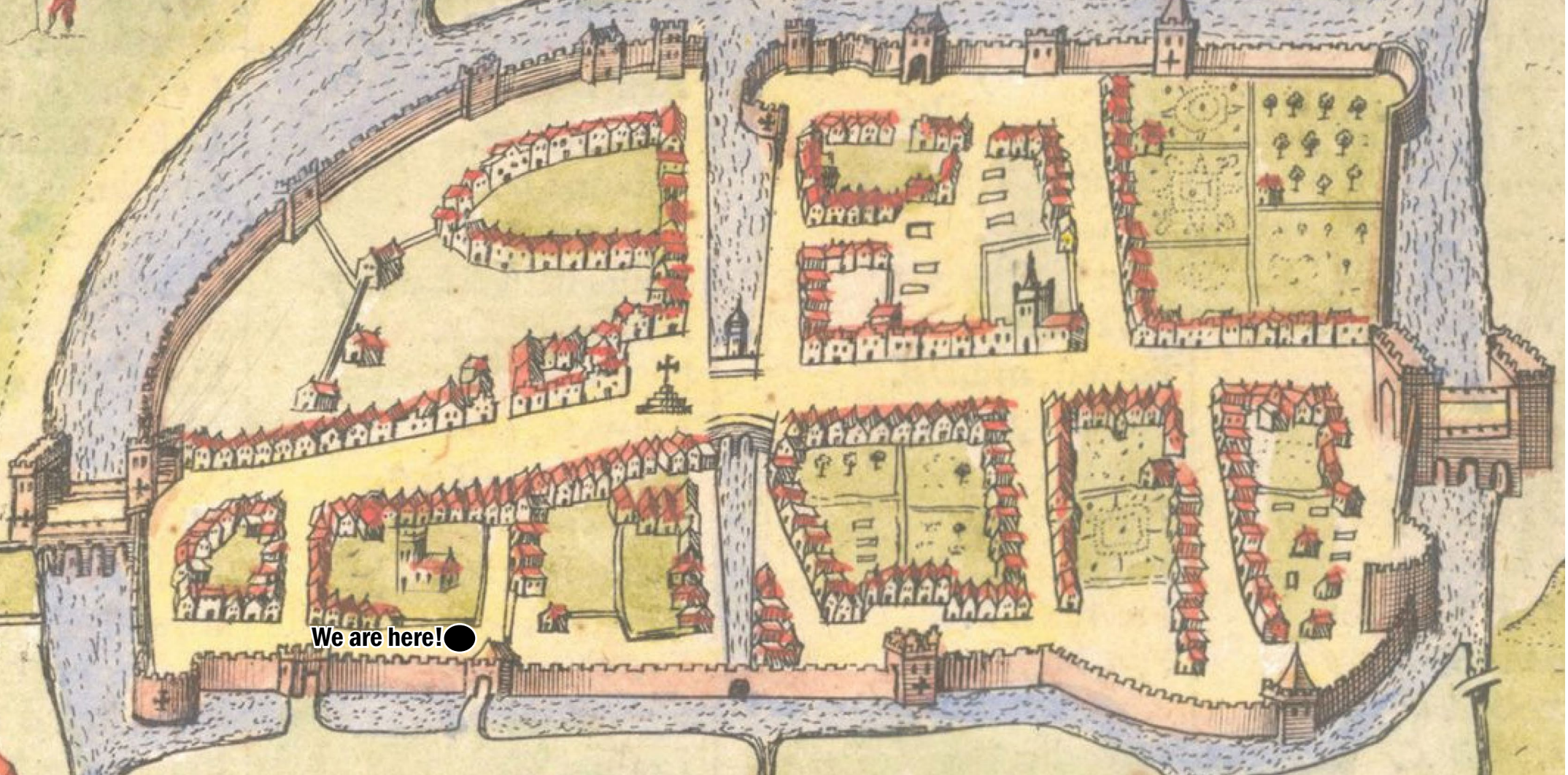
Kate O'Shea is an artist and organiser. In 2015, she co-founded The People's Kitchen, a space where people could come together to cook, eat, build community, and have a laugh as they shared ideas and formulated plans to address the challenges we face as communities today.

As the size of the events grew, the fun continued, but the underlying purpose—leading systems change from the ground up—got a bit lost in the mix. With the People's Kitchen North Main Street, the project returns to its roots. The People's Kitchen provides a framework for people passionate about systems change to literally sit around the kitchen table, share information and ideas from different perspectives, combine skills and knowledge, and formulate plans.

The People's Kitchen focuses on the energy of collaboration and mutualism—rather than individualism, isolation, and competition—to get things done. Connection and building relationships make work more enjoyable, more nurturing, and more productive. Link, Exchange, imagine, do. And have fun doing it.

This series of The People's Kitchen—set in North Main Street, Cork City, Ireland—specifically explores these themes through the lens of soil and food growing in an urban neighbourhood.





John Speed's 'Corke' from his Province of Munster c.1610-11

This series of the People's Kitchen takes place in Grattan Street, Cork, Ireland, just off the original medieval street of the city (North Main Street) and within the area previously enclosed by the city walls. This part of the city was urbanised almost 800 years ago.





Nicky

is an avid gardener
and Erin's neighbour

Erin

is part of The People's Kitchen
and lives on Grattan Street

Kate

is the initiator of The People's Kitchen
and took this photo



2018

As part of a transport strategy to move buses through the city centre faster, Cork City Council redesigns Grattan Street to facilitate car traffic. Footpaths are revamped as part of these works, and the two planters that marked the location of the original medieval City Wall are replaced with new flower beds.

The Council's contractor plants native ferns and woodrush mixed in with some pollinator friendly exotic shrubs and Mexican feathergrass. The soil is heavy clay, the beds are not maintained, and most of the new plants die off. The bed is soon overtaken by grass, dock, and nettles.

While plants like dock and nettles are good for biodiversity, people walking by perceive the planters as neglected space and toss sweet wrappers, coffee cups, and other litter in them.



Soil from the planter



2021

Local residents cleared the weeds, and the Community Association asked the Council to replant the beds. The Council plants dahlias. There is no follow up maintenance, and the weeds grow again.

2022

Nicky takes over one of the unloved planters and begins growing vegetables. She considers planting the other two spaces, but the soil is too hard and compacted.



Erin takes a pickaxe to the stop sign space to break up the heavy clay and begins to feed the soil.

(See more about soil and organic matter in [Zine #1](#))



There are over 9,000 species of earth worms worldwide, but only 7 species are suitable for vermicomposting. These seven live on the surface of the earth (are 'epigeic'), and they eat things like dead leaves and manure. Flip over a cow pat and you may find some.

The main worm used for composting is commonly called 'red wiggler' or 'tiger worm'. Its Latin name is *Eisenia fetida*, named after Gustav Eisen, a Swedish scientist who immigrated to California in the 1870's. Red wiggler worms are native to Europe but have been introduced to every other continent except Antarctica through European colonisation.

Erin adds **vermicast**, which is compost made by worms with the help of bacteria. The worms live in stacked wooden trays in her back garden. They eat vegetable peels, coffee grounds, and other scraps mixed in with cardboard and paperwork.



Erin also plants vetch as a **cover crop**. A cover crop is one that is planted to cover the soil rather than for the purpose of being harvested. Keeping soil covered with vegetation is important to keeping it healthy. The vetch also works with bacteria in the soil to 'fix nitrogen', which means it takes nitrogen from the air and deposits it in the soil in a form that plants can use.

Erin had eaten a squash grown by her friend Kitty. A leftover squash seed in the compost plants itself and begins to grow by the stop sign.



A baby squash surrounded by vetch.



Erin cooked the squash the next time Kitty came for a visit. (Kitty started calling her Erin Brockovetch.)



2023

Kate & Erin clear the second flower bed, removing the litter and digging out the grass.

Equipment:

- ☐ Bucket 1 for rubbish
- ☐ Bucket 2 for stones
- ☐ Big bags for vegetation (save for the compost)
- ☐ Gloves
- ☐ Spade/digging fork/ whatever you have
- ☐ Rake
- ☐ Brush
- ☐ Tunes





They add compost tea, which helps increase the microbes in the soil. Next, they add a layer of the compost made in [Zine #1](#).



Two months later

To keep the soil covered over the winter, they transplant wild strawberries and chives from Erin's back garden. They put back a few nettles and plant a bit of vetch. Nicky adds some marigolds she has grown.

You should never ever see bare soil. Walk into a forest, walk into a native [grassland] ecosystem. It's always covered, not only with living plants, but there's a residue layer that protects the soil from wind erosion, water erosion, evaporation.

—Gabe Brown, Regenerative Farmer





2024

Nicky's two planter gardens flourish. Despite being on a busy footpath, they are respected with minimal interference.

Erin adds a wattle fence to the stop sign patch and keeps building up the soil.

As an added bonus, Nicky and Erin get into loads of chats with passersby whenever they tend the beds.

DIG WHERE YOU STAND



Resources

Zine #1 provides details about the importance of soil, compost, and bacteria

urbanwormcompany.com (Pennsylvania) provides a free guide and all sorts of information about how to compost with worms.

notillgrowers.com (Kentucky) have a good introductory youtube clip 'Cover Cropping for Soil Health'

Books



The Fine Print

Compost Tea: Some consider compost tea a gimmick, while others swear by it. We made ours with some worm compost, leaf mould, a bit of comfrey, a handful of soil, and some treacle. We then aerated the mix with an aquarium bubbler.

Wattle Fence: Wattle fencing is typically made from willow or other flexible saplings. This is an experimental fence made with buddleia (butterfly bush). Many people do not realise that buddleia is an invasive species that can upset ecosystems in Ireland. We removed some buddleia from a nearby site and have tried to put the branches to good use (being very careful to ensure we did not transport any of the seeds).

Councils/Local Government: The new beds planted by Cork City Council failed repeatedly before the residents just gave up and did it themselves. It is easy to assume that these failures came from bureaucratic laziness, incompetence, or indifference. But a chat with many Council employees will quickly show that they are skilled, hard-working, and really care about serving their community. So what's the problem? How did we get here? The flower beds are a microcosm for reflecting on this issue.

Government exists to organise and manage the affairs of the community. Where does the balance lie—what should we do for ourselves as residents on the street at the most local level possible, and what services should we expect from the Council? And further, what should be decided at the local level, and what is best controlled by central government?

Is Irish government overly centralised? The Council of Europe, an international organisation focused on promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Europe ([coe.int](https://www.coe.int)) assessed Irish Local Government in 2023. Their report (See: ailg.ie/european-body-issues-damning-report-on-irish-local-government/) found that Irish City and County Councils have limited democratic decision-making powers and insufficient financial resources and autonomy. The report states that this limits Councils' ability to provide essential services and adequately respond to local needs. Ireland was found to have one of the lowest scores under the Local Autonomy Index (LAI), with Irish local government autonomy scoring a rank just above the Russian Federation, Hungary, and Moldova. Giving more autonomy to local government may be part of the solution.

In *The Power of Just Doing Stuff*, Rob Hopkins notes that two key factors for resilience within communities include:

Overlap: *'it helps hugely if we don't operate completely in silos or in very centralised, top-down bodies but overlap with each other. "Messy is better than streamlined."*

Tight Feedback Loops: *'this means that we need to get feedback about the impacts of our actions sooner rather than later'*





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agency for collaborative arts

