

GREEN fingers

Dee Sewell got married, fell pregnant and moved country all within six months. But a fresh start in Carlow planted the seeds for her award-winning business, writes **Maria Moynihan**

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Dee Sewell flicks through an old photo album from when she first moved to Ireland.

"They say getting pregnant is quite stressful, getting married, moving house," she says. "But we did all that – and moved country – in the space of six months."

Sunlight streams in the half-door of their renovated farmhouse, 1,000ft high in the hills of Co Carlow. A freshly baked courgette cake begs to be sliced on the kitchen table, while Xena the dog snores contentedly underneath. It's harvest time at the one-acre small-holding, with its apiary, free-range chickens and resident porkers, Miss Piggy and Kermit.

"This year we are trialling the 'Yellow Submarine' tomato," says Dee, before her husband Ian quips, quick as a flash: "You know the problem with Yellow Submarines? They attract Beatles."

Dee rolls her eyes good-naturedly. A mother-of-three, she runs Greenside Up, a business that gets beginners to grow their own food, and is a founding member of the Community Garden Network of Ireland. She is also an award-winning blogger, with greensideup.ie picking up multiple accolades at last year's Irish blog awards, including the overall title.

MOVE TO IRELAND

But Dee only started growing her own veg after a move to Ireland in the late '90s signalled a fresh start for the family – and a real-life lesson in self-sufficiency.

Raised in Britain, Dee's father was of Irish descent and had his own engineering business, while her mother ran the village shop. She left school at 16 to do a secretarial apprenticeship and worked in London as a PA until meeting Ian in her early 30s through a mutual love of motorcycles – and a dream to move to Ireland.

"In the space of six months, we got engaged in Canada, fell pregnant, got married in the UK and sold five mo-

torbikes and two small houses before packing all our worldly goods into a van, leaving everything and everyone behind in North Essex and Suffolk," she says.

It was on a tip-off from a local builder that Ian – who has an electrical background and now works with Intel – first came across the semi-derelict farmhouse which they bought with one acre for £39,000.

The couple initially rented locally while Ian began the extensive renovations, but as months started to turn into years, they moved in to a mobile home on the site to hurry things along.

"We thought six months and we'd be in," says Dee. "Our eldest Dan was three, Becky was about a year old and we had two dogs, cats and one bedroom – and a month later I fell pregnant with our third baby."

"We put a shower, toilet and a sink in the shed, made the kids a playroom and would collect water in a barrel from a neighbour's farm. I remember a friend said: 'You must just be running on love hormones because I can't see it.' But it was quite a happy time really and it made us really precious about life needs."

Eighteen months later, the family of five moved into their newly renovated kitchen on Christmas Day.

"There was still no sink in here, but the cooker worked," says Dee. "We also had the hallway finished, so Dan and Becky slept on a mattress there while Ian and I had an air bed in the kitchen and Ella was in a Moses basket on the floor next to us."

"Later, a friend put the stairs in for us and we got the first bedroom done in 2004. But it was another 10 months before we had the bathroom."

Pictures: Carol Dunne



It was around this time that Dee first began experimenting with growing her own veg, though with no formal training or even internet access, she admits to many rookie mistakes.

"I remember a friend came to visit and said: 'You have all your veg families muddled up,'" she recalls. "I was like: 'What are veg families?'"

"But when our youngest was about to start school, I decided to do a FETAC level five course in horticulture. It was five days a week and there was a lot of theory, but I was just like a sponge."

While Dee originally did the course to improve her own small-holding, she realised that there was an opportunity to use her experience to help other beginners and so Greenside Up was born in 2009.

"The initial plan was to go to private houses for consultations because I would have loved someone to give me an hour or two of the basic stuff and point me in the right direction," she says.

While private consultations are still

part of her work (€45/hour), Greenside Up has become much more focused on getting communities growing.

Dee has worked with 11 community gardens to date, including current projects in Callan and Freshford through Kilkenny LEADER. She has also recently started delivering a FETAC level three course in outdoor vegetable crop production at Ennismag on Kingsriver funded by the LEC, and has worked with a variety of groups, including the Irish Wheelchair Association, with a course in growing edibles in recycled containers, ranging from water bottles to jeans.

Her website beat 3,000 nominations to be named best blog in 2013, while her latest venture involves setting up community-style gardens for workplaces, a concept she developed after taking part in the "Inspire" innovation course in Carlow IT.

"I would have been very shy when I started the business," reflects Dee. "Even standing and talking to six people would have me shaking."

"But if you've got a passion, you'll just keep at it."

And watch that passion grow.

GREENSIDE UP GUIDE



GETTING STARTED

- Autumn is a good time to start preparations for a vegetable patch. Draw a plan of your garden and plot where you would ultimately like everything to go. But start small: one bed is enough for a beginner until you know how much spare time you have to work in it.
- Mark out your veg bed: 1.2 metres wide by 2.4 metres is an ideal size. This ensures you can reach the bed from all sides and won't have to tread on the soil.
- Raised beds are low-maintenance. If digging in your bed however, strip the grass/turf off, fork the soil, dig in some well rotted manure or compost (one bucket per square metre) and cover over with cardboard or black plastic for the winter. If you don't have time in the autumn, you can do this in the early spring, but allow a few weeks before planting to allow the weeds to come up and pull them before sowing or planting.
- Grow only what you like to eat, perhaps considering vegetables that are more expensive in shops e.g. shallots rather than onions.
- For beginners, I recommend starting with rainbow chard, garlic, "cut and come again" plants like kale, purple sprouting broccoli, mangetout, courgettes or mixed varieties of lettuce and a few blight-resistant potatoes like Sarpo Miras, Axonas, Una's or Charlottes. There's no need to reach for the chemicals if you choose these as they're showing great resistance.
- At the start, avoid beetroot, cauliflower and carrots, which can be surprisingly tricky.
- Grow flowers with your veg to attract beneficial insects: nasturtiums, calendula and marigolds to attract pollinators of all kinds. Bees love phacelia (tenacetifolia) and borage.
- There are many environmentally friendly ways to deal with pests. Squish tiny eggs between your fingertips or add a cap of eco-washing-up liquid into a litre of water in a spray bottle to spritz aphids, greenfly and caterpillars. The poached egg flower (limnantes) attracts hover fly, whose larvae eat green and black fly. Beer works best for slugs – find a publican with a slop bucket.
- Invest in *RHS Pest and Diseases* by Pippa Greenwood and Andrew Halstead. At the first sign that something is not right, check it out.

SOAP watch

Money troubles, affairs and people coming back from the dead, just another average week in Soapland, writes **Aisling O'Toole**

CORRIE

Still struggling to keep a handle of family life, Kylie takes more of Max's tablets, but when David finds out what she's been up to, he flies off the handle and tells her he won't leave the kids in her care anymore. Determined to get to the bottom of Max's problems, Kylie returns to her old estate to try and speak to his dad. Seeing her at the bus stop, Kylie fits back into her old life. Is this the beginning of the end for Kylie? Elsewhere, gossip about a possible romance between Julie and Dev upsets Mary, who gets very jealous over the pair's burgeoning relationship. Let's hope she makes a move on Dev.

EASTENDERS

Ronnie reappears on the Square this week with some big news, she's pregnant and Charlie is the father. When she reveals that she has no intention of including him in her future, Dot decides to take matters into her own hands to get Ronnie to see sense. Seeing Ronnie take control of her life, Roxy decides to issue Aleks an ultimatum, either their relationship moves up a notch or it's over.

Aleks insists they go on holiday immediately to show how much he loves her. But as they leave, a mysterious woman and child arrive on the Square looking for Aleks. Was his declaration of love real?

Elsewhere, the Sharon, Phil and Shirley triangle comes to a head this week when a gun is discovered and a shot fired. Who's been shot, but, more importantly, who fired the gun?

EMMERDALE

The Dingles are shocked when the bailiffs arrive and take the new TV in an effort to cover Sam's debts. Realising how bad things are for Sam, Lisa decides to take matters into her own hands and seizes an opportunity at work. When

she's caught red handed and sent home with a warning about her job, it's clear that the stress is affecting her health. As the stress mounts, Lisa takes another turn and ends up in hospital. Is she sicker than she's letting on?

Elsewhere, Priya starts to have doubts about marrying a man she doesn't know and so plans a romantic evening for herself and Rakesh. However, when things don't go to plan, Priya is left feeling very rejected. Is their marriage over before it's even began?

FAIR CITY

Just as the dust starts to settle over Christy's death, the reading of his will causes trouble again. Renee is shocked to discover she's been disinherited, while Carol and Sean are delighted with what Christy left them.

However, once the reading is over, Max and Farrah announce that they're returning to New Zealand and will be selling Phelan's. Convinced that Max is calling all the shots, Renee confronts him and the pair fall out. Who will Farrah side with?

Elsewhere, the reality of her decision starts to dawn on Niamh when Paul withdraws all the money from their joint account leaving her penniless. Has she made the right decision for love?

ROS NA RÚN

The lack of patients makes it clear to Cathal that his recent behaviour has cost him professionally. He is furious when he thinks that Máire has been screening his patients, but soon realises she had his best interests at heart. Can Cathal win his patients loyalty back?

Elsewhere, Lee is left shocked and furious when she discovers that Jason has asked Eimear to be godmother behind her back, when she had chosen Berni for the role. Will Lee get her way or will Jason stand his ground? **CL**



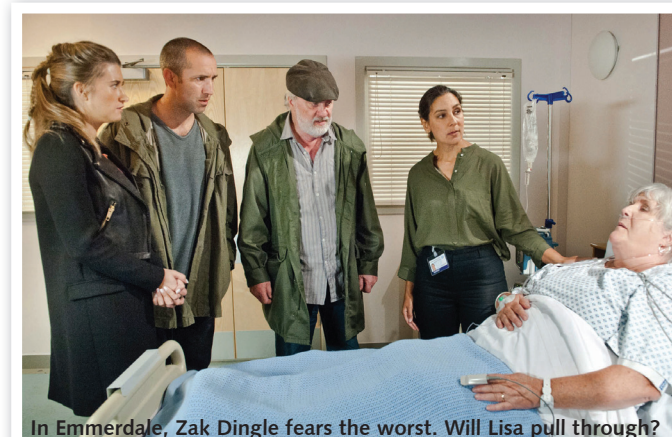
Tensions are running high as Phil, Sharon and Shirley come face to face in Eastenders, and it's not long before a gun is added to the mix.



Kylie visits her old neighbourhood to track down Max's dad Callum in Coronation Street..



The reality of her decision starts to dawn on Niamh in Fair City.



In Emmerdale, Zak Dingle fears the worst. Will Lisa pull through?