

Guest speaker: Adam Jones

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<https://youtu.be/OHYUwwQHnNM>

Cadeirydd / Chair: Dr Eifiona Thomas Lane

Eifiona Thomas Lane

We are concentrating today on health and well-being – of the individual and also the food system, from the garden to the plate and from the farm to the plate - so let me introduce Adam Jones, very well known as “Adam yn yr Ardd” (Adam in the Garden). Adam will speak about his work in the community and schools, encouraging, supporting and urging all of us to grow and be more confident with new skills. So, over to you, Adam.

Adam Jones

Heartfelt thanks for the welcome, Eifiona. What I would like to discuss is growing food at a domestic level and also how to encourage individuals in the community to be confident to grow food. And I'll touch on my work as “Adam yn yr Ardd”.

To start I will introduce myself. I've been a gardener since I was three years old. I was very fortunate to be raised with gardening as a natural part of my life. My grandfather grew up on a farm, farmed himself and continued growing food after moving to a small council house.

He grew up with a community and neighbours growing food. It was an era where people grew food to put on their plate, the era after the war when food was scarce but also a time of great change in how we grew food.

My grandfather had grown up in an organic tradition. His grandfather and his father had gardened in a totally natural way, which we think of as organic today. They just didn't use that label.

But my grandfather, like many other gardeners in the 60s and 70s, was charmed by the growing advertising campaign for insecticides, weedkillers; things that said "aphids be gone" and "slug eradication". My grandfather thought this was the way forward, that nature was something which had to be controlled in the garden rather than celebrated.

And that was the tradition I started in, the skills my grandfather transferred to me. But slowly I realised that the way we garden affects our land. I saw that productivity was lessening and the number of diseases increasing. Slowly I started questioning how my grandfather had gardened, which was a difficult thing to do because there is often a tradition that belongs to gardening as with farming. We often follow the same

patterns as our ancestors. But my grandfather had changed his way of gardening which was why I began with following his ways.

I lost my grandfather when I was 13, and I still kept both his garden and mine. I went away to University then returned to settle down and was keen to find a patch of land to grow vegetables to live self-sufficiently. We found this garden in Gorslas where I live now and the only thing that was important to me was space to grow food. My wife was keen to have a cosy home, I would have been happy to live in a tin shed, I have to confess. But the conditions for growing were awful, dreadful, and I'll say more about that soon.

As I developed the garden, I started recording on Instagram, begrudgingly because I wanted to garden, but people were saying to me, "Why don't you record your experiences?" And gradually I realised our story was missing - the unique way we garden in Wales, and using Welsh to convey this story.

So, I was filling a gap in a way, sharing advice, describing my experiences, and slowly the following grew. By a year and a half ago, I had over 10,000 people following and by now it is close to 20,000.

This has created a platform to share my experiences and to start a system of training. I have worked with a number of bodies which I'll talk about later. I was so lucky to have a mentor in my family. This is what farming and gardening is often in Wales - there is a mentor in the family and people follow, generation after generation. Respecting traditions is so important, even while developing new systems too.

By now, I am in the process of planning a market garden and I have got a few questions I'd be keen to answer about how we enable young people who haven't got access to land to be able to create a living in this field.

This was the garden when we moved in. Looking at it you would think there is not a lot one could do with this. The land was marginal, acidic - the pH from 4.5 to 5.6, so for most vegetables it would be very difficult.

I hope I paint a frightful enough picture. There was industrial waste, there was an old coal tramway following the path of the garden, and with that coal waste there was iron, there were invasive weeds in the garden. Over here there is Japanese knotweed.

You're probably wondering what gardener would buy a garden with Japanese knotweed in! In Welsh it's 'llyisiau'r dial', the revenge plant - that says everything, doesn't it? But also, there was Himalayan balsam and native invasive plants like "cwt y cadno" (horsetail), "blodyn ymenyn ymledol" (creeping buttercup), "gwlydd y perthi" (cleavers), "ladi wen" (bindweed). Every type of weed one would feel isn't suitable for food producing!

One thing which was obvious from the garden when we moved in was the lack of biodiversity. It was a wild enough space, but the diversity was lacking. Insects, for example, or amphibians, what we could see in the garden was very limited. Although I

want to grow food, I want to garden in a way that celebrates and strengthens the biodiversity that is in the earth.

So, I looked at the manner in which I was gardening, I started questioning, "Is the way I've learned, the skills I learned from my grandfather all correct?" And I looked more into the idea of regenerative farming, using an organic system, permaculture and also the system of no-dig.

Here is the garden in June this year. Four years later, this is the space I succeeded in transforming into a garden area. I have had to bring in topsoil to the garden and compost - peat-free compost I should emphasise - in order to create a space to grow. But the reason I emphasise this, is that often we hear in Wales that our land is marginal and it is no good, and there is no way we can harvest or grow good food on most of our land. It is true that stony soil in Meirionnydd over 400 metres above sea level is going to be a challenge to grow potatoes. But that doesn't mean there is no way to grow some sort of crops locally if we know the growing conditions.

The garden here, as I said, is boggy land 200 metres above sea level, is shaded, faces north west, yet, within a third of an acre I succeed in keeping us as a family and also four other families broadly self-sufficient in vegetables from this garden, on a small scale.

What has changed is my attitude to gardening. I have started to respect the health and structure of the land, realise there is biodiversity under the surface that we will never see, the microscopic, the mycorrhizal fungi which helps develop resilience for example and helps me to lessen my dependence on outside resources and create a thriving garden.

I garden now with nature not against nature. I include companion planting, I plant native plants like "tegan doli" (yellow rattle) and "coch y milwr" (purple loosestrife) to attract parasitic wasps, for example, to help against aphids and attract pollinators.

Adapting the way of gardening has been a success for me, refusing to stick to the tradition and mentor I respect. My grandfather adapted his way, he didn't tie himself to his father's way and his grandfather's or I wouldn't have had to learn much! In a way history offers us a number of answers for developing food systems for the future.

One thing I should emphasise, I have developed this garden whilst working full time in another job. People often say they lack time to grow food for themselves, their lives are busy, their family life is busy, and I accept that.

Slowly, I have reduced how much I am working full time because my garden has been earning income for me. Using the new methods like no-dig and permaculture ideas, has lessened the work. We always hear about gardening as something that is back breaking hard work. "Oh, they are working hard in the garden." I'd like to turn that on its head because it is negative. The truth is I succeed in spending about two hours a week in the growing season. "Two hours a week? Really? No, that is impossible." But because I use a no-dig system, I don't weed or water so much, nor have so many plant diseases, which makes the work quite a bit easier for me. Of course,

establishing the garden in the first place was a challenge and took time but once the foundations were there, I don't have to invest too much time.

My next slide shows why grow food. This will be obvious, I think, to most of us in this conference. We know the advantages to the environment and our mental health, our physical health, the nutrition which is in the food. We also know that it comes with a guarantee of food security and makes good food more affordable, creating local sustainability.

But does this message get shared in a simple way with the population? We can develop a foundation of food and encourage gardening skills, but without people's attitudes changing in how they appreciate and use food we are not going to reach this aim of people living more self-sufficiently and using local suppliers, appreciating the value of local produce.

Let me share a story. My mother is very aware of my passion for gardening, yet before Christmas last year Mam came over and said, "Hey, have you seen these carrots? 20 pence in Lidl. 20 pence in Lidl." And I said to Mam, "Mami, you know I grow my own food." "Yes, but 20 pence! You can't grow them as cheap as this." We know we can't compete with the large corporations and these large chains. But what has changed during the pandemic is that we have realised they aren't as reliable as they were. The resilience we thought existed isn't there.

So, we have to share these messages more widely. I support the courses run by Peas Please with Food Sense Wales, and it has been an education for me to see how little veg we eat as a population, and not only that but the narrow range of food we succeed in growing in the UK

The conditions in Wales are perfect for growing a wide range of seasonal food. I don't think you could get a small amount of land in western Europe that is as favourable. It is possible that we have a challenge as far as large-scale horticultural farming goes, but for local domestic horticulture, small ventures, community ventures, the potential to grow food is enormous. So, we must see these figures change.

So, what am I doing? What sort of work am I trying to do to change people's attitudes towards growing food? Well, one thing is offering training. I work with the National Botanic Garden developing digital resources talking about practical skills, watering, weeding, growing seedlings, and how that can be something easy for people. I have been working with Menter Caerdydd on a Welsh language gardening club. The lockdown has created challenges, but we hope we can establish ourselves with a plot of land. Also, I work with community education centres. I've worked with Farming Connect with farmers who are keen to change a small amount of their farming land to vegetable growing.

Regarding the traditional unique Welsh gardening culture, there is a danger sometimes that we don't celebrate the riches we have, the dialects, our village names, names of fields, farms, which all reflect our food history and inheritance. I would suggest you all to go back to watch last year's session by Carwyn Graves about that

because it was an eye opener to me about how rich our history is about producing food in Wales.

Also, I am keen to support schools to bring gardening into the new curriculum in Wales, including learning from experience and health and well-being. Schools have already realised, and increasingly quickly I think during the period of Covid, the importance of education in fresh air and knowing where our food comes from and how to grow good food. I have only seen enthusiasm. I haven't come across negative attitudes at all.

There is a lack of knowledge about where our food comes. There is a zest and enthusiasm from the teaching staff to include gardening as part of the curriculum, but the challenge is how do we give them the skills, confidence and resources to do this. Even in English there is a lack of resources in the schools for primary school children early in their education. There is definitely a lack of bilingual and Welsh resources, and it follows right through the education system, so I am keen to create and produce resources to support teaching.

I've published a book recently, "Dere i Dyfu" (Come and Grow) for children from 3 to 7 years old. The idea in this book is that you have two characters, Dewi Draenog (hedgehog) and Beti Broga (frog) leading the children through the whole annual cycle in the garden. I've deliberately used creatures that are useful to us as gardeners. Hedgehogs and frogs are key in any ecological system for controlling pests.

You know, take amphibians out of the ecological system and biodiversity of the area and you face major problems. So, I have deliberately chosen the two characters here to promote growing food in harmony with nature because it is one thing to have the gardening skills but equally importantly we need the correct, knowledgeable skills in the context of climate change and possibly more importantly regarding the biodiversity emergency as well.

So, where do we go next? I know we discuss this frequently, but I feel we need to make decisions, especially to do with the Community Food Strategy, the Food Bill and the working agreement between Plaid Cymru and Welsh Labour. We need to begin to develop an education system which includes gardening and producing food as an integral part of the curriculum. We need to invest in enabling individuals to work intensively with schools to develop these skills.

We also need to improve access to land. I can speak about my own experience. I mentioned at the beginning that I was keen to grow food. I am keen to establish a market garden. The attempt to gain access to land in my community in Cross Hands has been extremely challenging. I have been to the Council and to local farmers. I know I have the skills to produce food for the local food chain here, but gaining access to land is cause several problems.

We know that 60% of young people leave the countryside. This is going to create a problem maintaining the rural economy in the future. We also know that 43% of this sector, according to the latest census, speak Welsh. So, it is so much more than an agricultural policy in a silo of its own. We are talking here about a social policy to answer a number of social challenges we see in our communities.

I've read quite a bit of the work Duncan Fisher is doing in the Brecon Beacons with trusts buying land to enable individuals to grow on the land. But we need to adapt the planning system. We can't afford to continue to establish the large housing estates without public access to land to grow food. We have several mechanisms within policy, we need to look at them to make sure that people who have a passion for growing can do that.

And then I come to the last point which is understanding and respecting the unique culture and traditions of Wales. A bit controversial maybe. I've realised there are several organisations and groups trying to support growing, all over the UK, all over Europe. But often we look at the template from other places and insert that template into our communities instead of working the other way round of knowing the situations already in the communities and developing their gardening skills.

I'll give you an example. I was working with a community group in Llanelli who were growing wildflowers to put into planters in a housing estate. They didn't have help because they weren't a trust of 11 people who had signed up to some sort of community scheme; so they had lost out on getting advice and support from a number of charities as they weren't an existing group. Then a group that had been established in another area, did get support and came into the community from outside to do that project. But there isn't any security for the future because who is going to maintain the project? Who will have the skills in that community?

I am going to get off my soap box for a minute, I apologise but if we are to develop a Welsh Food Manifesto where food is something we can make a living out of, eat well, improve our health we need to do that in a way that respects what we have already.

I mentioned traditions - farming traditions. There has been a lot of discussion hasn't there, a hot potato as it were, about large companies planting trees on farmland in mid Wales. This is an example of a lack of understanding and respect for the existing culture. The answers for a lot of our challenges already exist in our communities and this is important too regarding the Welsh language.

We need to make sure we create projects which don't only encourage growing food but also encourage Welsh; encourage the unique culture of these areas. Cross Hands is a very good area, I would say, to grow most vegetables; Blaenau Ffestiniog isn't. But in Blaenau Ffestiniog you would be able to grow grapes, because warmth comes from the rock in a small ecosystem. So, we need to work with people who are there already in their own areas and bring people together too.

I know this is the intent of this conference and I am extremely thankful to be offered the invitation to come here today, but I'd like to finish quickly with saying that I'd like to make a career out of growing food. I'd like to fill the local food chain with good vegetables, and I would like to share my skills with other people. How can I create the conditions that enable a number of people, like me, in the same boat, to do the same thing? This is an open question. I haven't got all the answers. With that, thank you very much, and you are very welcome to ask any questions. I know the time is tight and I apologise for that, but I am keen to continue this discussion.

Eifiona Thomas Lane

Thank you very much, Adam. I have a number of questions. You mention permaculture. I see you have succeeded in adopting these methods and principles on your land. How do you feel it is possible to extend these methods into other systems, like farming for example?

Adam Jones

That is a very good question and I believe this is one of the obstacles we face when we talk about large and centralised areas, especially if you think of the system of no-dig, where you bring a pile of straw or crop of compost into the land annually. You would need tons of compost for say 20 acres of farming land if you wanted to grow in the same way and this would create a challenge. That is why I feel the answer is on a small and local scale. I know from our history that was the food system. When we look at Carmarthen market gardens back in the 19th century, we know that it was a patchwork of small areas.

Maybe we shouldn't be asking the farming sector to change totally but start a sort of parallel system. I think that everyone should do their share but on a micro level. I think as far as the idea of ploughing goes, there are examples of farms between one and five or ten acres who do succeed in deploying a system of no-dig in part of their land. Henbant in Caernarfon also has adopted permaculture on a larger scale than a domestic garden. There are a lot of market gardens, maybe not more than about five acres, who succeed in doing this. So, is this the answer then? To accept that rather than diversifying the majority of farming we already have, we create a patchwork.

And, making a living, Duncan Fisher's work has shown from the maths that two people can make a living from one acre of land if they do it sustainably. So, can't we encourage that all over Wales? We know that getting access to land is a problem, we know that a lack of local housing is a problem in rural communities. Well, if the planning system could enable farms to free up land to people within their families and so on, we can create this. Someone could make a successful business from 2-5 acres of land from a traditional sheep farm.

But another point about diversifying, in my opinion we don't celebrate enough the way we already produce red meat. We have been sucked into this Anglo-American argument that the way we produce red meat is very bad for the environment. There are issues with intensive farming, yes, but the way in which we keep grass in Wales, drawing in carbon, is also very important.

So, is the diversification of every farm the answer each time? I don't think it is. I think we should support these farmers who develop quality produce and continue to do this. But they also see there is an opportunity to develop small enterprises producing food. If every farming enterprise in Wales did this, I would think we would come a lot further, we could produce more vegetables. So, permaculture to me works on a micro scale. I am not sure so much on a large scale.

Eifiona Thomas Lane

Thank you very much. There is a question in the chat from Arfon Hughes. Would you like to ask the question yourself, Arfon?

Arfon Hughes

Thank you very much Eifiona. And thank you Adam for your talk. You are quite an inspiration.

As Jane and I are very aware - we are part of a new project called Tyfu Dyfi in the Aberystwyth/Machynlleth area, the Dyfi Biosphere - and I was thinking, how would you raise community awareness to grow communally, Adam. Have you got some tips?

Adam Jones

I have read a lot about Tyfu Dyfi and I think it is an exciting project and the type of project we need to develop in every part of Wales. I think we must remember it is people we are dealing with. Often, we over-complicate what we are trying to do. We are setting up the foundations of co-operative government and the idea that there is a committee, a forum, but it is perfectly alright that Mrs. Jones just wants to turn up to a piece of land and grow potatoes. She doesn't have any interest in being a Secretary or Treasurer.

Wales is the country of committees, there is no doubt about that, but often people just want to do something simple, and escape from their working life. People can be put off if it is too similar to their working environment, they don't want gardening to be like that. So, there is a need to communicate clearly and simply. Growing food is the aim and doing that in a happy atmosphere.

There is certainly a need to communicate better digitally. I have learned of several ventures that are not online and would have been an inspiration to me if I'd known they existed five years ago. So, we can encourage groups to celebrate what they are doing. Instinctively, Arfon, we Welsh don't celebrate our successes. My initial reaction when Eifiona asked me to come here was, "Why do they want me to come here? I'm not a specialist, I'm not an academic, or a professor with umpteen research papers on the food system." But what I am is a gardener, and gardening is what is important to me on a practical level. It is important that we have academics, that we have Welsh research into our situation, but we have to recognise the simplicity of life and people's needs.

So, to me, cut down the bureaucracy, have clear communication and make it affordable and sustainable. And slowly, especially if we work with education, that generation will respect and see the value of this. I don't want to say that there is a forgotten generation but my own mother knows how much food is central to my life, but as far as the cost of food goes she still would rather pay 20 pence for a bag of carrots in a plastic bag from Lidl compared to growing them with holes throughout them from carrot root fly, but still eating a little bit of it because you have made the effort of growing it, you know. That is keep the message simple, don't over complicate, I would say.

Eifiona Thomas Lane

Thank you, Arfon. That is a very interesting answer and exactly why you were chosen, Adam, to come here and share these experiences and your attitude towards

encouraging everyone to grow in a way that can be happy and fun and something very worthwhile socially as well as environmentally and healthy.

I know with the work I've been doing with allotments around my area in North Wales there are a number of people who are a part of this for exactly the reasons you say and they don't want outsiders interfering. They don't even want interference from one or two plots down from where they are gardening. It is the opportunity to have the time to concentrate on the soil and growth not on people.

And I think this is really important for us to celebrate. I would like to see more support from, maybe not town councils who do respond to this, but at the level of county councils. I see there is a place for them to do more with networks of growing and connect this with taking the produce out to local markets, because with a lot of these gardens they are not allowed to grow vegetables to sell, and this is something else that is needed to be dealt with.

Roni Roberts

I was very interested when I saw on Facebook that you were presenting "Dysgu yn yr Ardd" (Learning [Welsh] in the garden). I thought it was a great idea to learn Welsh and gardening at the same time. I just wanted to hear more about this, and how successful do you think it has been?

Adam Jones

That is a very good question. I think it comes back to the main message - that we are dealing with people and the language belongs to the people who speak it. From what I've seen, quite a few people who are learning Welsh, from the demography, have more time, a number have retired, a number have cut down on the hours of work and that allows time to learn a language. Also, the same people have a lot of interest in gardening. There is no mystery here. The most popular resources I create are for learners and I'm surprised about that.

And it is encouraging because we know, for example, there is a richness of Welsh words relating to farming and gardening. I have been lucky, there is nature surrounding me without even knowing about it, the local names of plants for example, and often I don't even know the word in English. But, unfortunately, sometimes the connection isn't so strong even in the Welsh community. I know several Welsh speakers who refer to vegetables in English, things which are in the supermarkets or on the menu in restaurants.

The resources for learning Welsh are not only for people who are learning the language from scratch, but also for people who want to enlarge their vocabulary. All of us who speak Welsh are learning the language. I learn English every day and I am learning Welsh every day. I didn't know for example, that dill is called "llyisiau'r gwewyr" (the pain / spasm vegetable). Grandfather referred to it as "dill", the English word. But I created this calendar with llyisiau'r gwewyr in it and I got a message straight away from someone - "What is this llyisiau'r gwewyr you mention growing? I don't know what you are talking about." A Welshman to the core. So, this year I have put terminology in there.

We are learning together, aren't we? There is a gap, and I should have said in the presentation - I have resigned from my full time work. I haven't officially left; I am still working there till Christmas. I work for Coleg Cymraeg (Welsh College) but my intention is to work full time gardening and so I can create more resources for learners too.

It is possible to create a career if that is where your heart is, you know. I was advised not to study land studies in school, I was too academic, I should go to university. And I have regretted following that path to this day because I would have been in my element learning about how to work the land. It is never too late, there is always time to learn, isn't there? So, I hope gardening is going to create a career for me and my family as well.

Eifiona Thomas Lane

Thank you, Roni, for that question and thank you Adam for your honest answer. I'd like to know where I could get hold of the calendar for Christmas presents. I wonder if you could hold it up again for us to see.

Adam Jones

The calendar is in shops: Bys a Bawd, Siop Eifionydd, Siop Yr Hen Post Blaenau Ffestiniog, a lot of local shops. If it is not in your local shop, it is also available direct from the website and if you have grandchildren or young children in the family "Dere i Dyfu" is in all the local Welsh bookshops. Also, if you live in Machynlleth there is a new bookshop and they have copies for sale. So, contact me through the website or go to your local shop. We need to support each other.

Eifiona Thomas Lane

Thank you very much. Well, I can see something in the chat asking you to be an ambassador across Wales, but don't do that at the expense of growing, I'd say. If people are listening there'll be a note in the chat and the conversation will continue after this. Certainly, we in the movement will be glad to have a blog from you about this and publicize your work. It's very exciting, and I wish you all success, from me personally and everyone listening today.

Thank you very much for your contribution to the conference and for moving the discussion about practice along. Thank you, Adam.

Adam Jones

Thank you to you too, I have enjoyed every minute.