

In photos: A family hobby that is now blooming



13 hrs ago / [Julie Kenwell](#)

WITH the average age of Northern Ireland Daffodil Group members coming in at around 60, mum of three, Julie Hardy isn't your stereotypical daffodil breeder. She and husband Dave could have accurately been described as novices only six years ago.

But with a passion for gardening and a good business head, she is now the proud breeder of up to 500 varieties of daffodils on her family's farmland in Dromore.

"It all began as a hobby for Dave," Julie explains.

He had attended a Northern Ireland Daffodil Group event while Julie and her eldest son, Theo visited relatives living close-by.

"I was made to feel so welcome," Dave recalls.

"I got talking to Brian Duncan, one of the best daffodil breeders in the world. He is from Omagh. As we chatted, he invited us around to his to see his daffodils."

Since this initial meeting, Brian has played an instrumental role in helping both Julie and Dave to hone their skills as worldwide daffodil breeders

"We initially were growing mainly from Brian's seedlings," Dave says, "And with

some bought from Nial Watson of the renowned Ringhaddy Daffodils.

“I remember thinking to myself: ‘How have I spent £70 on 12 bulbs?!’”

“He hid the receipt!” adds Julie, “It was a beginner’s pack, and it all started from there.”

The couple are now a world away from those first tentative steps into the world of daffodil breeding.

Having incorporated Ringhaddy Daffodils as part of their own Esker Farm Daffodils business in the last year, Julie’s business on her doorstep has taken on a life of its own. And they owe much of it to the support and encouragement of others, including Brian Duncan.

“Brian started off by asking Dave if he would help him lift bulbs, clean them and treat them for him.

“We have now come to the realisation that he was actually ‘grooming’ Dave! If that is the right way to describe it!

“I think Brian saw Dave’s potential and his passion and interest and he was thinking of preserving what he had already built by passing it on to a younger generation. So he asked Dave to take on the seedlings and plant them here at our home with the intention of printing a catalogue. That is when I properly came on board,” Julie explains.

With little teacher supply work available and her three young children at home, Brian had handed Julie the perfect opportunity to cultivate a hobby while making some money. The couple’s initial catalogue, along with a Facebook page, brought in orders from as far away as Japan, America and New Zealand.

“Most of the people who placed orders last year have already placed orders with us this year, so we are looking at that as a good thing!” says Julie.

“We had envisioned steadily building it up over the years, but since buying out Nial Watson’s Ringhaddy Daffodils as well, we are now at the stage that we had imagined we would be in 10 years time.”

Nial had been thinking about cutting back but his loyal customer base in America had pleaded for him to continue on. When he saw Julie and Dave’s initial catalogue, he saw potential and opportunity.

“When he asked us: ‘Would you be interested in buying me out’, we were very taken aback,” Julie recalls, “We were obviously very keen to keep the business in Ireland -- there is so much history there, we didn’t want to lose that. But it was also a very big decision - a huge financial commitment and certainly much more than we had been considering at that time.”

But their enthusiasm for the business pushed them to seize the opportunity with both hands.

“There is nobody within the UK doing the work themselves as we are now,” says Julie, “There are UK suppliers, but they outsource. I suppose that is our USP -- that we do the work ourselves, whatever the weather. We were planting on Dave’s

birthday in November last year and there was a frost on the ground!”

Of course with every business, there are challenges along the way. But Julie is determined to meet each one head on. “It is a 12 month job -- I didn’t appreciate that before I took this on,” she admits

Now in the throes of show season, Julie is trying to strike a balance between home-life and ensuring Esker Farm Daffodils has as wide a reach as possible. She recently attended the National Daffodil Show in Sacramento, America and she and Dave have released a new and improved catalogue for this year.

“We wanted to make it a lot bigger and more user-friendly,” she explains, “We made a conscious decision to use lots of pictures and I think we are really seeing the benefit of that through orders and positive feedback.”