

Bounty of the deep

GARDENS



THE WAY WE WERE: A farmer collecting seaweed to use on his crops



I don't know what it is, but something about the sweet smell of seaweed makes my mouth water. Perhaps it's in my blood - Higgins means 'akin to Viking', and my Nordic ancestors would certainly have come across a fair amount of it on their travels.

Farmers who lived near the coastline have used seaweed on their crops for hundreds of years, until they were persuaded to change to chemicals. In recent decades, it has been sidelined, whether that's due to the comparative convenience of commercial chemical feeds or the increasing breakdown of the once symbiotic relationship between farmers and the land.

Seaweed is a wonder plant with a huge range of uses, from processed foods such as yoghurt, chocolate milk, health drinks to quality German beer. It's also used in cosmetics and has even been touted as a possible biofuel of the future.

It really comes into its own in the garden, however. Adding a seaweed meal to a

SHORE THING: Niall Reynolds with his seaweed and chicken manure-based products



How one entrepreneur's organic plant foods are showing a way beyond chemicals in the garden

light soil improves the soil's water retention and provides scarce nutrients and trace elements.

On top of that, there may be growth-promoting effects due to natural substances in the seaweed: simple organic compounds called betaines. They have an extraordinary range of effects on crops including improved yield, better frost resistance, increased

uptake of inorganic constituents from the soil and more resistance to stress conditions. Pretty impressive, and it's completely natural.

In any case, it probably comes as little surprise that I have succumbed to the wonders of the slippery stuff, and use it on my lawn, plants and trees with superb results.

One man who's doing amazing things with seaweed is Niall Reynolds, an Ag. Science graduate who left his career in IT when the recession struck and is now running a business creating organic plant superfood using seaweed, chicken manure and humic acid from coal.

Over a cup of coffee recently, Niall told me: 'My family are heavily involved in farming, and some years back my father, Ray, set up a free-range egg unit on the farm.'

'One of the issues with any poultry farm is how to get rid of the manure. I had noticed that any time he spread the hen manure on the land, the growth was amazing. I did some research on how to utilise

this manure and discovered an Australian company, Neutrog Fertilisers, that was successfully making premium fertilisers using chicken manure as the main ingredient.'

Niall took the plunge and travelled to Australia to learn more about the business. He was so impressed, he decided to set up Neutrog Fertilisers Ireland, which is a licensed manufacturing and marketing company for Neutrog products, including Seamungus.

My favourite Seamungus product uses seaweed from Connemara, chicken litter and coal dust.

Niall says it's ideal for growing your own vegetables, as it is high in organic matter and has the full range of trace elements, not to mention the growth stimulants you get from the seaweed.

He also has a full range of non-chemical fertilisers that provide an excellent Irish-produced alternative on the garden centre shelf. His Rapid Kaiser is an 'all-purpose organic fertiliser' in pellet form, and the wonderfully titled Blade Run-

ner 'is a slow-release, natural feed which will give your lawn healthy sustained growth, unlike chemical fertilisers, which give quick upward growth that doesn't last', Niall says.

'All our products help the development of healthy, well-structured soils and promote microbial and earthworm activity. This leads to healthy soils, and I believe healthy soil equals healthy plants.'

The fact that his is an Irish company sourcing its raw materials here, manufacturing here and employing people, is something to consider when you're shopping. He also sells his fertilisers to farmers and commercial users.

I even asked Niall to invent a non-peat-based compost, which I believe would fill a gap in the market, and I'm confident he will have something for me before long.

For me he is a garden hero, a term I normally reserve for the likes of ladybirds, lacewings and bees, who all work away quietly doing some of the most important work of nature. In a funny way, that's what Niall is doing by offering natural solutions to natural problems.

www.eugenehiggins.ie

For more, see www.neutrog.ie. For more information on seaweed, check out www.seaweed.ie.



SPARKLE: Folio by John Rocha for Waterford Crystal

Swing towards designer crystal

If, like me, you thought you had heard the last of Waterford Crystal, you'll be surprised to learn John Rocha has a new range of glassware out with the crystal institution.

The Folio collection offers champagne flutes, red wine, white wine and stemmed water glasses characterised by delicate cuts, balancing texture and form.

By **Muriel Bolger**

The contemporary look makes them suitable for everyday use. The collection is available exclusively at Brown Thomas Dublin, Cork and Limerick, and costs €60 per pair.

With more and more people shopping online, Cork-based curtain maker Mary O'Riordan

didn't hang about. Her new website offers 30pc savings on showroom prices and a three-week turnaround time from order to delivery.

Her firm has been in business since 1970 and now you can browse through the made-to-measure shop 24/7 and even request fabric samples. For more information, see www.perfect-curtains.ie.

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