

MARY ROBINSON



“My favourites are very much trees, I find it hard to say which tree, I think probably the oak. One of the joys of our place in Mayo is that we have a lot of trees. It’s very wooded and there are beech, oak and hazel. We’ve also done some planting and earlier owners did some quite exotic planting. My grandparents’ place had trees and, in my memoir, I tell the story of loving to climb trees and being high up on a tree when my grandfather came out — I was ten at the time — and he decided that I had to be sent away to boarding school because I wasn’t behaving like a lady. I was too much of a tomboy, climbing trees. I’ve always loved trees. I don’t climb them as much now.

I bring flowers into the house during the summer and arrange them. My mother taught me. My father was a very keen gardener. He had a hard-working garden in which he grew lots of vegetables, and between them roses, tulips and you name it. He had a greenhouse with carnations, tomato and cucumber all in the one place. So I used to arrange flowers — I was the only daughter so that was my task. I still love arranging flowers down in the West, it’s natural, we get lots of daffodils at the right time of the year, we get lots of hydrangeas, it’s not so much that I’m a good gardener and planter, it’s that at different times of the year I welcome what nature provides.

I’m very conscious of the way in which weather is changing, especially for poor communities and I think we’ve underestimated how much climate

change is already affecting people. The images we use are of the melting glacier, or the polar bear on an ice floe, and it seems a bit far away, but certainly from my travels, I am all too aware that it is deeply affecting subsistence farmers.

In Kenya, when I was on my way to Somalia, I saw pastoralists who have to go much further to get fodder for their goats or their camels. I’ve been aware from friends living in Uganda that there are no seasons anymore. In the village where my friend Constance Okellet lives, she speaks in despair of about long periods of drought and flash-flooding destroying the village.

In Liberia, which I have visited a number of times, they used to have very predictable rainy seasons, and now the rainy seasons aren’t predictable, don’t come when they normally would have and stay far longer. So it’s very hard to plan anything. And we’re seeing weather changes in Ireland, we’re going to see more rain unfortunately and more flooding in low areas and we all need to become more resilient.

I think that there’s also an importance of valuing the biodiversity, and gardening and being close to the soil can teach us about ecosystems and their importance, and the fact that we’re interfering with the fragility of the earth itself through global warming. What I see as a grandmother, with grandchildren who are going to be in their forties in 2050, is that they could have awful shocks to contend with, brought about by global warming, because we haven’t been taking the right decisions. And their children and grandchildren may have an unliveable world. It’s as bad as that.

For me, walking in our grounds and looking at the trees as old friends and the young ones we plant as almost like babies, I get great comfort and peace of mind. I just love walking in the woods, that is my favourite. There are wonderful places that I enjoy, but I’m lucky that I can just enjoy being home, when I can get there. ”

— in conversation with Yvonne Gordon

Mary Robinson was President of Ireland from 1990 to 1997 and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights from 1997 to 2002. She is president of the Mary Robinson Foundation — Climate Justice and the recipient of numerous honours and awards including the Presidential Medal of Freedom from US President, Barack Obama.

Mary Robinson is honorary president of Oxfam International, a board member of several organisations including the European Climate Foundation and Chancellor of the University of Dublin. Her memoir Everybody Matters was published in 2012. For information on the Mary Robinson Foundation, see www.mrfcj.org.