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Time to Monitor Airbnb's Impact on Dublin's Housing Crisis

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Graceful catmint is coming up to scratch

The plant species that drives all the felines crazy is robust and highly decorative — just keep it away from their sharp claws

For many years I could not grow nepeta, but I'm giving it a go again. The reason for my failure is embodied in the species' common name, catmint. The usually blue-flowered plant contains a substance, nepetalactone, which acts as a magnet for moggies. Plant a patch of catmint where there is a significant feline population and you are doing the equivalent of opening an opium den for cats.

They arrive all expectant and tail-waving, and before too long they go all flirty — fondling and batting the stems, and nibbling the foliage and flowers. Next, they are rolling and squirming in abandonment as they break the shoots to release more of the narcotic chemical.

After a few sessions your fine, healthy plant has been reduced to a ragged stump. Nonetheless, it still attracts cats, who gnaw and roll on it, in an attempt to get the last of the volatile oils from its damaged tissues.

The catmint with the greatest concentration of nepetalactone is *Nepeta cataria*. With pink-tinged white flowers and nettle-like leaves, it is not as showy as most other varieties, but it is often included in medicinal gardens.

Traditionally, infusions and decoctions of catnip were used to promote sweating, to cure coughs, and to alleviate pain, colic, flatulence, hysterics, insanity and a host of other discomforts. I do not recommend it, incidentally. Leave that to the herbalists.

Some gardeners suggest using *N. cataria* as a sacrificial plant so that felines stay away from the more ornamental and precious varieties. But I can't see this working, unless you are prepared to supply a new plant each time the cats have scratched, squashed and bitten one to the ground.

Our own garden is relatively cat-free now, thanks to the presence of a fox and cubs, and also because there are fewer felines in the nearby houses. So I think it's safe to grow catmint again.

After telling you all the reasons why you should not grow it (cats and more cats), now I would like to share some thoughts on why you should.

Nepeta is a tough, drought-tolerant plant, and is largely untroubled by pests and diseases. Deer, it is said, won't eat it. It is ideal for combining with bush roses — the kinds that have knobbly knees that need hiding.

It is also one of the

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best plants for marking the verge of a path or placing alongside a patio.

Plant it near the edge of the bed and let it froth over the hard landscaping. Its hazy blue flowers, which appear for most of the summer, make a nice contrast with stone slabs or gravel. Be careful about planting it next to a lawn, as later in the season it can slump over the grass and suppress its growth.

Nepeta is also perfect for adding a decorative frill to a garden building. In the walled garden at Glenarm Castle in Co Antrim, for example, it makes an unforgettable mauve-blue swathe along the 100-metre glasshouse.

From a distance you might think it was lavender, but the leaves are different (ovate, serrated and greener) and the flowers are larger.

It is a close relative, though, as both belong to the mint family (Lamiaceae) — a clan whose members are particularly attractive to insects. So, if you plant catmint, you're doing a good deed for bees, butterflies and other invertebrates.

The hummingbird hawk-moth, a rare visitor, is fond of the flowers. It's always a thrill to see this comic-book insect with its fake eyes, torpedo-shaped body and quivering wings.

There are two readily available varieties of nepeta: 'Six Hills Giant' and 'Walker's Low'.

The former can grow up to a metre in height, but it can be a flopper in fertile soil. 'Walker's Low' is neater, reaching about 60cm. This is the cultivar that is more commonly used as an edger. You can see it employed to perfection at the Airfield Estate in Dundrum, where it lines the paths in the walled garden. Colm



Catmint makes a swathe of mauve-blue in a border, while the hummingbird hawk-moth, left loves nepeta. Right, *Nepeta gowaniana*, from the western Himalayas



Margery Fish, the great British cottage gardener (1892–1969), was keen on catmints. In her famous book, *We Made a Garden*, she recommends continual deadheading. "Proper treatment is trimming off the tired flowers as they finish so that there is a constant succession of new growth," she says.

Work from below, Fish adds. "Lift up the lady's skirts and cut all the old growth from underneath. New shoots will spring up from the centre."

Time-consuming? Yes, but Margery Fish, who had little help in the garden, was famous for working 18 hours a day.

Two unusual catmints worth looking out for, and which look well when grown as singletons, rather than en masse as edging, are the pale-yellow-flowered *Nepeta gowaniana* from the western Himalayas, and *N. kubanica* from the Caucasus. The latter is beefier than most of the others, with large leaves and good batons of dark-blue flower. In my garden, an isolated plant came unscathed through the cat years.

O'Driscoll, who is in charge of the ornamental part of the gardens, recommends replanting nepeta every three years or so, as the clumps can get overlarge and woody. "You can divide them in early spring, or it's really easy to take basal cuttings in April. Make them

about three inches. They root so easily." Most years, the first flush of flower is nearing an end in July and the plants can be cut back and fed, and, all going well, they will bloom again.

O'Driscoll likes to use home-made comfrey feed, if possible, but any

proprietary high-potash fertiliser will do.

The second flowering can be insignificant, he warns. "This year, we might just let it be. If it is a dry summer, it stands well and doesn't go floppy. You just have to play it by what the plant is doing," says O'Driscoll.

Grow for it

Don't dig it

Somerset-based Charles Dowding, right, a leading proponent of "no-dig gardening", will give a talk about his growing methods at Killruddery House in Bray, Co Wicklow, next Sunday (June 19) at noon. Admission with the garden entry fee is €7.50. See charlesdowding.co.uk and killruddery.com



Potent plants

Take a guided walk next Saturday (June 18) through the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin and meet the plants that have been used in brewing, distilling and fermentation over the centuries. The Brewing Botanicals walk starts at 3pm at the visitor centre and costs €5. botanicgardens.ie



A midsummer dream

Shakespeare's Gardens by Jackie Bennett (Frances Lincoln, €32). Marking 400 years since the playwright's death, Bennett visits gardens known by Shakespeare, and considers the plants grown in his lifetime.

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Time to monitor Airbnb's impact on Dublin's housing crisis

A few weeks ago, I attended the Association for Law, Property and Society conference in Belfast.

This event is normally held in America, so neither the US participants nor I knew the city. It was time for an experiment and, at €115 (€148) for a central two-bedroom apartment, Airbnb was cheaper than a hotel.

Airbnb started in San Francisco (where else?) in 2007 when two friends who couldn't afford to pay their rent advertised an airbed to rent nightly, including breakfast. One airbed quickly turned into three and a website. Airbed and Breakfast was launched in 2008, becoming Airbnb a year later. By 2011, it had hit its first million bookings, and on it went.

The latest data I could find shows that Airbnb had nearly 3,800 listings in Dublin, with 83% in Dublin city. Nearly 45% of listings were for the entire property, with the remainder for rooms. The average spend per booking is €94 a night. Airbnb had about 240,000 bookings in Dublin in 2015, generating an income of more than €22m.

Given Dublin has a housing and accommodation shortage, it's worth analysing this. These 240,000 nights are the equivalent of 657 people. Taking the 45% who advertise their entire property, this equates to an annual 292 housing units, hypothetically accommodating two-thirds of homeless families living in hotels.

It's simplistic to think of Airbnb as hotel-industry "disruptors", or chilled property owners renting a spare room to supplement the

mortgage. The top three hosts in Dublin have 21, 19 and 14 listings respectively. Hotels are also getting in on the act, buying up properties to rent on Airbnb.

The company doesn't provide outsiders with much information (I had to source my figures from the independent data tool set inside Airbnb.com), making it hard for local authorities to assess its impact on the local community or city, but it wouldn't be too hard if they put their minds to it.

Airbnb hosting raises several

issues in the Irish context, mostly applicable for those renting out units in apartment developments.

Apartment users could well be in breach of their long-term lease in renting their property out for commercial purposes. There are issues of insurance as well, especially for damage to communal areas.

Then there is the issue of whether the regular letting of an entire property requires planning permission. Until recently, authorities have been hands-off, saying planning permission is only used if a property changes from residential to commercial use.

The case of *McMahon v Dublin Corporation* in 1996, however, said short-term lettings constituted "commercial use", so if an entire property is available year round — or for letting for more than, say, 90 days a year — isn't that now a commercial use?

On foot of a complaint from Temple Bar residents, Dublin city council recently decided an apartment advertised for sale as an Airbnb unit needed change of use planning permission. This was a property-specific



Nearly 17m people found a place to sleep thanks to Airbnb last year

determination that the council says cannot be extrapolated to other properties, which makes it rather pointless.

There is also the issue of personal taxation of that €22m, as Airbnb is excluded from the €12,000 per annum rent-a-room scheme.

Finally, Airbnb has a local impact, especially when the effects of numerous stag nights and other such parties (or in the

case of the Temple Bar residents, a brothel) are taken into account. This isn't just about the impact on the area — stag nights can just as easily emanate from hotels — but also about the impact within residential buildings.

I noticed this in Belfast last week. While it was very convenient for me to come and go in my building, I was conscious of the apartment owners having to

keep a wary eye on yet another unknown person with keys to their building, up to who knows what, in and out at all hours.

Airbnb is now essentially a conglomerate business pretending to be an amateur pin-money sideline. In 2015, for example, it accommodated nearly 17m people, and had a turnover of about \$900m (€790m). Its projected image belies its significant impact across several areas from the national (housing shortage) to the personal (who is in my building?).

In the context of housing shortages, other countries are beginning to take heed of Airbnb's impact, with Germany recently restricting most lettings to no more than 50% of the host's property. Iceland and the Netherlands are imposing similar restrictions.

Airbnb is a wonderful idea, but not without impact. Irish local authorities would do well to monitor Airbnb and develop an official policy.

The convenience of Airbnb for consumers must always be balanced against inconveniences for citizens and the state.

LORCAN SIRR
ON THE
HOME FRONT

