

## **Growing a family farm success in Co. Meath**

**Stephen McCormack is managing director of McCormack's Family Farms, a Meath-based producer of pre-packaged herbs and salad leaves for the retail sector. The business was originally set up in 1984 by his father Edward, who started out growing vegetables in a neighbour's one-acre garden to sell to restaurants. In 1998, by which time Stephen had joined, they pivoted, ditching low-margin vegetables such as potatoes and carrots in favour of higher value herbs and salad leaves such as rocket and spinach. In 2015, they launched Loose and Lively Beverages, a raw juice brand.**

### **What's your business's elevator pitch?**

We find herbs, baby leaves and micro-leaves for salads that are being imported from Europe and we grow them here in Ireland instead, packaging and selling them here so that consumers can enjoy them freshly grown and locally sourced. We also make a range of raw juices on the same basis.

### **What do you regard as your business's greatest achievement?**

Growing from a two-man operation in 1998 – just my father Edward and me – to a business that employs 130 staff. Our first month's turnover was €8,000. Now we turn €15 million a year.

### **What was the lowest moment?**

Definitely 2012. It was one of the worst years any farmer has had to endure. Certainly my father said he had never seen the like in his lifetime. It rained for three months solid. We lost 50% of our supply.

### **How have you coped with setbacks?**

The only way to cope is to learn from them so that you can avoid them the next time. After 2012 we scoured Europe to find and invest in new harvesting applications that will allow us to be more weather independent in future. In this business, you have to react very fast. When you're working with plants, you can't count on things sorting themselves out over time. You typically get 24 hours to make a decision and take a course of action. The best way for me to cope with setbacks is to act fast.

### **What's your attitude to risk?**

Risk is the main player in any business. You're always going to have a certain amount of it or; you'd get nowhere. The key is in the preparation. If the rest of the business can afford the course of action you are thinking of, and won't be brought down if it fails, then go for it. On the other hand, if you've worked out what's involved and you're still not comfortable, step back. Trust your gut.

### **Who has inspired or motivated you and why?**

My father Edward. In 1984, he left a job of 30 years to set up this business. He had three young kids at the time - I was the eldest at 10 years of age. I've three kids of my own now and the oldest is 10 so I can appreciate the courage it took. I don't know if I'd have been brave enough. I'd have to include my mother Laura too because while he was selling she was out planting in the fields with us kids, and driving the tractor because I was too young to do it.

### **What do you do, if anything, to switch off from the business?**

Thanks to my three kids under the age of 10 most of my free time is spent picking up and dropping off to all sorts of after school sports and cheering them on from the side. I like to get out for a pint with my two brothers too, both of whom recently joined the business.

### **What would you do differently if you were starting your business today?**

Well, the work ethic would stay the same. When you run your own business it is very much 24/7, you do what has to be done. But instead of leaving school after the Inter Cert, which I did, I'd have stayed on and done my Leaving Cert because I know it would have helped me in various parts of the business. I would also have delegated more. Like many entrepreneurs I had the urge to do everything myself, I wouldn't cede control. The problem with that is that for every one job you do well there's two you'll do badly. We'd have developed quicker if I had realised that sooner.

### **What lessons have you learned in business that others could apply?**

My bank manager will laugh because he has had to rap me on knuckles for this but cash flow is for running your business - paying suppliers and wages. Profit is for investing back in to the business.

### **Finally, if there was one piece of advice you'd like to give to another business owner, what would that be?**

Stick to what you know best but make sure you enjoy it. If you don't, you won't put in the extra effort required and that's a losing battle.

