18

Starting up community orchards and fruit gardens

Community orchards can be beautiful places to grow fruit, improve our diet and provide resources to share with the whole community. Did you know that almost 70% of our apples are imported? That you can grow more than 2000 varieties of apples? That Cox's are sprayed an average of 18 times a year?

What is a community orchard?

Five trees can constitute an orchard but you don't need this many and you don't just need to grow apples or pears. Plums, damsons, cherries (preferably trained as fans) quince, mulberry, medlar and nut trees can all be grown.

Why start a community orchard as part of a community garden or farm?

- Grow unusual varieties, including heritage varieties, not obtainable in shops.
- Enjoy organically grown fruit and make delicious preserves.
- Provide an important habitat for wildlife.
- The orchard can be a focus for community events throughout the year.
- Opportunities for volunteers to learn new skills (pruning, jam making).

A community orchard can integrate with other parts of your project. You could:

- Create barriers of espaliers planted E-W to get the sun or cordons planted N-S.
- Plant free standing trees, in the style of a traditional orchard, protected by strong netting to graze sheep underneath.
- Allow pigs like Gloucester Old Spot access in the autumn to eat up windfall apples.
- Allow chickens to scratch and pick up pests.
- Use your orchard to provide a site for beehives.

Do we need any special skills to start a community orchard?

Although pruning can be done by following instructions obtained online or from books, it is best if your members can attend training for both summer and winter pruning of apples and pears. Maybe one of your existing staff members, board or volunteers would like to take responsibility for the orchard project?

Planning a community orchard

Orchards can be set up on or near school grounds, in hospitals, on council land, on town greens, derelict sites, alongside paths and on the edge of forests, as well as on allotments and on open ground.

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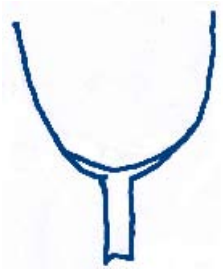
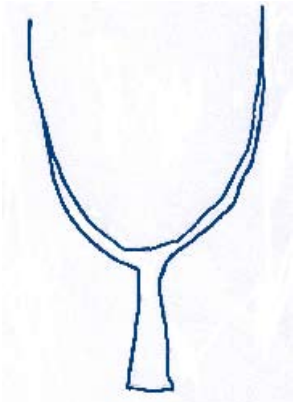
Growing apples on different rootstocks

Bush on M27 - extreme dwarf, upto 2m

Bush on M26 - dwarf, upto 3m



1/2 Standard on MM106 - semi-dwarf, upto 4m



Standard on M25 - very vigorous, 4m plus

- You will need to get the land owner's consent and have some form of Tenancy agreement (see Common Ground's Community Orchard Handbook)
- The council should provide information about contaminated land
- Do not plant near under/overground services (gas/electricity etc)
- Agree planting position with landowner, to make sure new trees don't interfere with other land use or maintenance, for example, a grass cutting regime.

What and where to plant

- Trees need sunlight to ripen fruit and preferably a south facing site, although plums will cope better with shade and morello cherries are suitable even for north facing walls and fences.
- If you have frost pockets or cold conditions, look for varieties that are hardy and which flower late. You will need to create wind barriers on exposed sites.
- Choose varieties which will give you fruit throughout the season and ones that are compatible for pollination.
- Fruit trees can also be inter-planted with blackcurrants and redcurrants which can cope with some shade. These will need netting from birds.
- Redcurrants, loganberries and blackberries can all be trained along wires or fences on shady edges of your plot to extend the fruit available.

Soil

To grow fruit successfully you need to make sure that they have reasonable growing conditions and space.

- Avoid very chalky or sandy soils and add plenty of compost.
- Acid, peaty soils may need calcium and other nutrients adding, but are great for blueberry bushes.
- Avoid waterlogged soils. Plums, mulberries and quince cope best.
- Avoid planting apple trees where fruit trees have been grown in the past.
- Walnuts should not be planted near apple trees.

Rootstocks and spacing

- Fruit trees are grafted on to rootstocks, both because fruit will not grow true from seed and because different rootstocks will control the growth of the tree itself.
- Rootstocks are given different numbers, all starting with an 'M'.
- Most nurseries will only supply trees on one or two different rootstocks.
- Generally dwarfing rootstocks will produce little growth, need good soil and feeding, but produce fruit earlier on in the tree's life (within 2-3 years of planting). They also need permanent staking as the roots are not large enough to anchor.

Training options

Bush or standard

Espalier

Fan

Cordons

- If trees are allowed to branch out freely, the roots will extend the same amount so this gives an indication of the minimum spacing required.
- Space cordons (M26 or MM106) 1m apart, espaliers 4.5m apart.

Creating a community orchard

Draw out a plan on graph paper. Always do a map with the names and rootstocks of the varieties you plant. It is difficult to keep permanent labels attached, metal markers last best. Ordering fruit trees can be done from September but trees will not be lifted until the leaves come off in November.

Planting of bare root trees can take place from November to the end of February. Trees in pots can be planted at other times but will need to be kept well watered. They are more expensive and sometimes more difficult to establish. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) has produced guidelines on planting trees. See *www.rhs.org.uk/Gardening/Help-advice/Videos/Planting-trees* for video clip.

Maidens (one year old trees) often form better root systems. They can be shaped into bushes, standards, espaliers, fans or cordons. The last 3 are known as trained forms and need to be supported by wires and canes. They can be free standing or grown against walls or fences. If free standing, strong metal or concrete posts are needed, particularly for cordons.

Once planted, the ground around the trunk should be kept clear of weeds and grass for a 1m diameter. This can be achieved by mulching with cardboard or woven ground cover. Dwarfing varieties should be kept permanently clear of competition.

Trees should not be allowed to bear fruit in the first year after planting.

Maintaining a Community Orchard

Pruning is important in shaping the tree, giving an open goblet shape to bush and standard trees with 3-5 branches coming off the top of the main trunk. It also means that air can circulate, reducing fungal disease and allowing sun to reach the fruit. Pruning and tying branches towards the horizontal rather than allowing them to grow upwards, encourages fruit buds to form. See RHS website for further information.

What to do with the harvest

Your members will be delighted to take home the first apples in August and some of the later apples will store through until the following year. Surplus fruit can be sold at markets, fairs, apple days, roadside stalls, hawked round neighbours or offered to schools. From late September fruit can be stored up for pressing as juice.

Windfalls can be collected and, after removing bruised and spoilt parts, cooked and frozen or turned into jams, chutney or pickles. Juice should be made with sound fruit, picked from the tree and washed. Bottling fruit is another alternative to the freezer. You can also try fruit leather or chews made with honey, apple paste sweets and dried apple rings.

You may have other produce such as mistletoe, wild flower plants, coppiced hazel and fruit wood to sell.

Involving the local community

Tree planting events - An opportunity to get local people involved as the results are immediate and people may form a lasting interest. Perhaps ask people to buy or sponsor a tree, or ask businesses. Environmental groups sometimes organise bulk purchases of fruit trees. The Tree Council and other bodies can provide grants. National Tree Planting week and Tree dressing day are in early December.

The Wassail - Wassail is an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'be in good health'. Traditionally an orchard Wassail takes place on 17 January and is a celebration of the orchard to ensure fertility in the year to come. Mainly celebrated originally in the south west of England it is an opportunity to attract in members of the public to drink mulled cider, apple juice and cakes. Wassail songs are sung, local to the area, often morris dancers or mummers perform. Toast soaked in cider is put in the branches of trees for the robin, the guardian of the orchard. Noises are made to ward off evil spirits. A great opportunity to involve children.

Blossom time - Most blossom occurs between mid April and the end of May, with plums first and apples last. This is a good time for picnics, poetry, art events and storytelling.

Wildlife open days - If your orchard has lots of wildflowers or herbs growing near it will attract beneficial insects. Woodpiles will attract wildlife and ponds can be good for dipping. Patches of nettles left around the edges are home to aphid eating ladybirds and caterpillars. Involve the public in digging and planting a pond or building tit nesting boxes as these birds are brilliant at picking up insect pests.

Apple day - Apple day is traditionally 21 October. Even if you haven't got large crops, it's a good way of drawing in people to the orchard. Apple varieties for tasting and local juice can be bought in, or you can borrow a juicer and make your own juice. Also a chance to appeal to local apple tree owners for surplus crops. Apple cakes and other produce can be sold.

Cooking sessions - Make cakes, chutneys, jams and juice to share with volunteers. Don't forget to check with your local Environmental Health officer if you want to sell produce.

School visits - Primary schools should have someone in charge of environmental education. Risk assessments need to be done and it is a good idea to create a worksheet for children to complete. Talking about pollination, fruit growing, compost and wildlife are always popular and it's good to get the children to do some drawings.

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