

ARTICLE

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Reviving Cambridgeshire Favourites

Why we should embrace our fruit growing heritage

Encouraging biodiversity, reducing food miles by growing our own food, and creating community spaces whilst celebrating local heritage – what's not to love about orchards? With a rich history of fruit growing across Cambridgeshire, particularly in the north of the county, orchard management has long been integral to the way of life of many Cambridgeshire landowners and communities. However, with the rise of convenience lifestyles, a 'grab and go' attitude towards popular fruits such as the humble apple, and a decline in traditional orchards since WWII, perhaps the time is now ripe to ask, 'is it time for a local orchard revival'?

Towards the end of 2024, Natural Cambridgeshire, the Local Nature Partnership for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, working in partnership with the Peterborough Environment City Trust (PECT), embarked on a journey to explore this question. Enabled by a Together for Our Planet award from the Community Fund to support local leadership and skills development, they delivered of four workshops at three community orchard sites aiming to pass on the knowledge, history and skills of orchard management to community members in the north of the county.

Workshops took place for eight community participants at each of the Fenland Orchards Project near Wisbech, Fenland (which hosted two workshops), the West Raven Community Café and Garden in Peterborough, and the Ramsey Abbey Walled Kitchen Garden in Ramsey, Huntingdonshire. The focus of each workshop was to learn grafting skills, and alongside that we discovered so much more. Here is some of what we learned.



What's in an orchard? Isn't an orchard an orchard?

Commercial orchards are managed intensively for fruit production, often involving the use of chemicals such as pesticides and inorganic fertilisers, frequent mowing of the orchard floor rather than grazing or cutting for hay, and planting of short-lived, high density, dwarf or bush fruit trees.

Traditional orchards are long-established and widely distributed habitats that significantly contribute to biodiversity, landscape character and local distinctiveness. There are many regional variations, including apple, pear, cherry, plum, damson, and walnut orchards. These orchards are managed in a low intensity way, often without chemical pesticides and artificial fertilisers and are typically on privately owned land. The number of traditional orchards in the UK has declined considerably since WWII.

A community orchard is made up of at least five fruit trees and can include over 100. They can be located on publicly owned land, such as a park, school ground or other public green space, or on privately owned land with public access. Since the decline of traditional orchards, which were often attached to farms or large houses and country estates, community orchards have become an increasingly popular way to bring communities together to share food, to celebrate local heritage and to take action for nature.

Why are community orchards good for biodiversity and the planet?

Many of the apples, pears and plums in our supermarkets are imported, and when a kilo of apples produces a kilo of carbon, it is worth considering more ethical and sustainable options of providing these staple foods. .

Local fruit varieties, and we will limit ourselves to Cambridgeshire's particular strengths as apple producers, are more suited to our unique climate and soils. An orchard with a range of different varieties can also produce apples for a longer growing season, and which will last all year round with storage.

Pollinators, such as bees, love local orchards for the blossom and wildflowers, if they are being managed in a low intensive way. 70% of our food is derived from the activity of pollinators, and when local biodiversity is under threat, as ours is (Cambridgeshire has at

least half the amount of land managed for nature than any other county in England), one really good way to enhance biodiversity is to restore a traditional orchard, or create and manage a community orchard. Our role as protectors of our environment is to create habitats that have the greatest number of benefits for the greatest range of pollinators and invertebrates. When you increase these creatures in any habitat, you naturally provide a food source that links into the complex food webs that build thriving ecosystems.

Why should we care about our local heritage varieties?

Thanks to the pioneering endeavours of Cambridgeshire orchard owners and managers, both past and present, there are many local varieties to choose from. Although some have been lost, around 20 are still associated with Cambridgeshire including the Red Crockett, the Jolly Miller (believed to have been named for a Cottenham village pub) and the Barnack Beauty. Reflecting the skills and knowledge of head-gardeners from private estates who were given the licence to create new varieties, we also have the Lord Burghley, Lord Peckover and Lady Hollendale varieties among those to choose from.

As Tony Cook, from PECT states, "How wonderful would it be for more people to grow these Cambridgeshire varieties? Whilst they may not be the perfect version of an apple that you get in the supermarket, they are more suited to our climate and soils, our pollinators love them, and of course, if we grow local apples, they travel very few food miles. That's got to be good for our planet."

What's grafting, why is it important, and why isn't just planting a pip from an apple that I like the best way to get the fruit that I want?

Growing fruit trees from seed is possible but as most trees are outcrossing there is no certainty that the mature tree will produce the same fruit as the parent. Additionally, apples grown from seed-grown trees are often not very tasty. Grafting, which involves binding a rootstock onto a scion, is the most common and successful way of propagating fruit trees. Rootstocks and scions have different characteristics, and propagating trees in this way provides considerable control over the final height, vigour and, in some cases, disease resistance of the tree.

Grafting through the Ages

Grafting is a science and an art that has been practiced around the world for millennia: binding a cutting from a favoured tree into the cleft of a sapling was regarded as a very ancient arch in China pre 1000 BC; Romans were known to have valued and practiced grafting, with evidence of grafting found in a mosaic in France dating back to the 3rd Century, and it has been suggested also brought orchards to Britain; in the 5th to 10th centuries the tradition of grafting was largely kept going by the monasteries, with the 10th Century Abbot of Ely known to be skilled in planting gardens and orchards; in the Islamic world, the Book of Agriculture 1080 by Ibn Bassal includes sections of pruning and grafting. In British heritage and culture, William Shakespeare, has perhaps captured some of the intricacy and poetics of this fine art:

QUOTE:

You see, sweet maid we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race: this is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather: but
the art itself is nature.

William Shakespeare, A Winter's Tale 4:4 (1611)

By 1600 there were over 48 apple varieties in France, and in 1628 another 35. Today there are over 100 different rootstocks around the world to vary tree size, vigour and fruiting characteristics. By learning about and reviving the skills required to keep our local heritage fruits varieties alive, we are connecting in to a much larger tradition of food producing, and that spans cultures and global geographies; and at the same time connecting to nature.

Who are keeping these skills alive?

There are some excellent examples of well-known and lesser well-known orchards, ranging from the Grantchester Orchard near Cambridge in the south of the county which has recently come under the management of Cambridge Past Present and Future, to the newly planted Fenland Orchard Project near Wisbech managed by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Learning Trust, and many in between.

In addition, the groups and organisations who already manage a community orchard, or are in the process of creating one, there are many organisations in Cambridgeshire who are keen to offer their skills and knowledge to inspire and support the development of orchard projects. PECT is one such organisation which shares knowledge about growing fruit and runs workshops to teach the traditional ways of managing orchards in a non-intensive, chemical-free way.

Tony Cook from PECT explains more. "Orchards are an artificial environment, created by us to produce apples, so they need managing. Our workshops teach the essential heritage skills such as how to graft a cultivar onto a root ball, a skill that also helps safeguard our local heritage species."

Pamela Abbott, Director of Natural Cambridgeshire, said "traditional orchards are such a precious and wildlife rich habitat. Restoring and enhancing the biodiversity of traditional orchards is a priority action in the draft Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's Local Nature Recovery Strategy. As well as conserving existing orchards, we hope to encourage and support people to create new community orchards, planting them with rare and unique local fruit varieties with an understory of species rich grassland. Community orchards can provide locally produced fruit as well as wildlife oases for people to enjoy nature on their doorstep."

You have an important role to play - learn more

On many levels, well managed traditional or community orchards can be some of the most important green spaces in our local area. Picture a scene where sheep graze and hens peck between gnarly barked fruit trees in a grassy meadow buzzing with life. It may be a nostalgic view of Cambridgeshire, but it is an integral part of our way of life. In tough times this tradition can deliver food, biodiversity benefits and much more. We'd love to know what you think.

With a view to kick-starting a local orchards revival project across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, we'd love to hear from anyone who would like to be part of an active community of interest to establish a local orchards network in our area. If you are a community orchard wishing to help to strengthen a local network through information sharing and visit hosting; if you are a private land owner with a collection of fruit trees who would like to know more about how to manage your tree stock better; if you are an individual or group who would like to know more about how to set up and manage a

community orchard; or if you are simply an interested individual with a curiosity learning more about this fascinating subject, we'd love to hear from you.

Please get in touch by emailing: communities@naturalcambridgeshire.org.uk