

The Orchard Project – urban community orchards in the UK

By Katherine Rosen, Chief Executive

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The Orchard Project is the only national charity dedicated to the planting, restoration and care of community orchards, in the UK. We focus our work on urban orchards in the biggest cities in the UK.

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I am Katherine Rosen, I have been leading The Orchard Project as CEO for over 13 years. I grew up in London and with a very green fingered mother who had coaxed an apricot tree to grow and produce pounds of fruit in our small urban garden. I could lean out of my bedroom window and pick those sweet, juicy fruits. This really inspired my love of growing food especially in urban environments.

In the UK, 80% of all traditional orchards have been lost since the 1900s and 35-45% of orchards remaining are in declining condition as a habitat.

The vision of The Orchard Project is that everyone in urban areas is within reach of a well-cared for community orchard. We have worked in 7 cities in the UK, throughout England, Scotland and Wales and have a way to go before we reach our vision, and we believe that community orchards, especially in urban areas can play a massive role in improving people's lives. We concentrate our work in areas of the most deprivation and three quarters of the orchards we work on are in the areas of the UK with the highest indices of deprivation.

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Over the last decade, we have planted, restored and supported over 700 community orchards and directly engaged 75K people in fruit growing skills.

We don't own any of the orchards that we work on or own the land, our role is to support community groups to plant and look after their own orchards.

Our model is quite unique in the UK and involves working directly with the beneficiaries of that community to design, plant and look after the orchard and bring accessible and engaging expertise. We get excited about any ways we can find to engage people in fruit growing. This can be through holding orchard events and celebrations such as wassails (a pagan orchard celebration) – basically a big party involving drinking cider and dancing in the orchard, to designing pedal powered portable juicing machines to using orchards as outdoor classrooms for school children. We also have harvesting programme, supplying food banks with waste fruit. This is alongside a huge training programme in orchard skills such as pruning, aftercare, natural control of pests and diseases and grafting etc. The orchards are predominately situated on council owned land, for example in public parks or around social housing. We also work in unusual locations, for example we are working in UK prisons, which surprisingly have a huge amount of orchards growing in their land, training in-mates to plant and prune fruit trees.

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Why are urban orchards so important? By 2050 in the UK, 90% of the population will be living in urban areas, and worldwide by 2050, it will be nearly 70% of the global population. To put it boldly, as we move from a rural to a more unnatural urban existence, as natural creatures, we start to suffer. We desperately need to ensure that we have access and can engage with natural spaces in our urban areas.

There is so much evidence that access to natural spaces in urban areas have a central role to play in the health and wellbeing communities. For example, The World Health Organisation reports that 'urban green spaces ... provides psychological relaxation and stress alleviation, stimulating social cohesion, supporting physical activity, and reducing exposure to air pollutants, noise and excessive heat'. I heard an interesting fact recently that people in cities who can hear bird song suffer less from depression.

Urban greenspaces like orchards promote wellbeing. They connect people to nature and neighbours, and provide a local source of healthy fresh fruit.

And most cities do have green spaces. For example, perhaps surprisingly, 42% of London is green space. However, the green spaces accessible to communities are not necessarily of high quality.

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In terms of our impact I will tell you the story of one of our orchards is on the Wenlock Barn Estate in East London. The estate is in Hackney, 10 mins from Old Street, in a very built up area with little green space. 7 years ago, tired of constructors dumping debris on the estate, the residents decided to plant an orchard.

Putting orchards into these spaces can transform them from lower quality wastelands to high quality greenspaces, that people value and protect. For example, one of our orchard sites on an estate in East London, a strip of land surrounding some social housing in a very built up area was previously used as dog toilet and dumping ground. With The Orchard Project's help, this was transformed into a beautiful community space. The land where the orchard was used only be used as a dog toilet. It is now used for picnics, birthday parties and it's a wonderful space to hang out. There are 16 fruit trees, from apples to apricots, which now attract grasshoppers, goldfinches, bees and butterflies. The orchard also acted as a catalyst for other community improvements, for example a community garden and kitchen. When I went to visit it, a group of Bangladeshi women were cooking flatbreads in the outdoor oven as other members of the community harvested food from the garden for a feast. It was all very low key and normal and just felt right. It was a staggering contrast to then to step back out into the hard, impersonal and dirty hustle of the London streets

Sarah is a local resident and she believes the orchard has really helped neighbours to connect and trust each other. She says "It felt like there was an invisible wall around the estate, but the orchard has brought non-residents in. We feel real pride in where we live."

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We prioritise our work in areas of highest deprivation. People who live in these areas are more likely to experience a deficiency of access to greenspaces, defined by how far households need to travel to access a space. These green spaces are also usually of low quality and size. Areas of deprivation also suffer from food deserts – ie a lack of places to buy affordable fresh produce. It's in these places that community orchards can make such a big difference.

We are also working on how we can reduce some structural injustices through our orchard work. For example, we offer bursaries on our accredited training specifically targeting at people who are unemployed or People of Colour. This training is an 8 month course in community orcharding and we have a high success rate of graduates moving into green sector employment. We also offer graduates the opportunity to become part of a train the trainer programme, again aimed at people from People of Colour, who then become trainers on our programmes.

In London, we also harvest waste fruit from orchards to supply food banks and people in poverty – around 5 tonnes this year. Unfortunately there is huge demand for fresh produce but also a huge supply. There are over 30 mature orchards in London and an untapped amount of apples in people's gardens. We offer orchards who donate their fruit a proportion back in either training or money to help keep the orchards well looked after.

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One of the golden threads throughout our work is to maintain well looked after orchards. An extremely disempowering thing for a community to experience are their fruit trees stunted, diseased or even destroyed through lack of care. In the UK, there is a huge tree planting agenda being pushed forward to address climate crisis, and this is fantastic, but we are not seeing a corresponding understanding of the need to care and fund aftercare for those trees. Young trees, especially fruiting ones, need tender care in their first few years, watering, mulching and pruning. An older veteran fruit trees need a different type of care, just like the children and elders in our human societies.

Up to 50% of urban trees fail because they were badly planted and little aftercare was provided. Our model is different; we care about communities and orchards in equal measure; community orchards are about people and not just trees. We plant orchards in partnership with community groups, and provide skills training and ongoing support. We enable people to come together and collectively care for their community orchards for years to come. As a result, our tree survival rate is high, at over 90%.

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Stephanie is going to talk in more detail about how we work with community groups, but I will give you an outline of our model.

We only plant an orchard where we know there is a group of people in that community who really want that orchard to happen. These people tend to belong to existing community groups, for example resident's associations, green groups or friends of groups in parks. We are fortunate in the UK that most local authorities, who are predominately the landowners, actively want community groups to help manage their sites. I know this is not always the case in other countries, but in the UK, this is driven both by cuts in local authority budgets so they are looking for help managing their land but also a genuine belief in the value that engaged local communities add to land management. Our referrals tend to come directly from the community rather than the local authorities, and where we have taken on projects that weren't initiated by the local community, these don't tend to do as well. There is a lack of ownership and these are the orchards that are usually badly looked after, with any fruit produced not being used by the community.

We help the local group build a relationship with the local authority, if they don't have one already, to obtain landowner permission and also to start talking about management. Local authorities can often help with watering as part of their schedules (although supplementary watering is also needed by local volunteers). And we need to ensure that the grounds contractors don't inadvertently cause

damage to trees through strimming. This is often a major factor in tree damage. One pass with a trimmer can ring bark a tree in seconds leaving it more prone to disease and with unhealthy vigour. We also guard our trees heavily to protect both against this and vandalism.

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Another feature of our model, is that we offer people high quality, engaging and inspiring training in community orcharding. We don't want to just plant a tree in the ground and walk away. Our model of community orchards is based on skills development and it is through this that the orchards and the communities they support will be sustainable.

We do this in a variety of ways. We offer non-accredited training to the volunteers associated with both new and veteran orchards. These are called our orchard leaders; the people from that community, who will take on the primary care for those trees and cascade their skills to others. These volunteers often then go on to take part in our accredited training programme that I mentioned previously.

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The training starts with a design process, using 3D models to map out which species, varieties and any other features the local community want. The trees tend to be a mixture of newer varieties which we know grow well and some historic ones which can be linked to historical food growing. This ensure we are able to maintain a genetic bank of all the amazing varieties of fruit, engage people in their local area and also provide fruit that will be wanted by the local community. As part of this design process, we help the groups to develop an orchard management plan. This sets out who will be involved in watering, mulching etc and when. The training then continues over the next couple of year, involving site visits to teach pruning and aftercare skills. We have recently started to offer our groups training in non-violent community skills and group work as we have seen that the success of the orchard is most linked to the success of the group.

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We have recently shifted our design process to go beyond orchards - towards polycultures. These are more akin to forest gardens or food forests and are a practice of incorporating food growing into all the possible layers of a forest ecosystem. This allows the production of not only food, but also medicine and materials, while nourishing the ecosystem as a whole.

Food forests are not a new concept. They have been recorded in Europe since Neolithic times, and have long been cultivated by indigenous peoples in the Americas.

For our orchards, this involves planting berry bushes, herbs, and creepers below and around the fruit trees. We also plant other species that provide shelter, fertility and pollination banks to build in more resilience in the orchard system and also new types of food for people to try.

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There are hundreds of new species to experiment with this approach. This slide sets out some of the benefits but I won't go through it in detail for the sake of time. For more information on this, we run a course in forest gardening, which is also available online if you are not based in the UK. We are currently planning a new project based on therapeutic orchards, planting medicinal plants to use as natural teas. Communi-tea

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Our model is focused on creating networks of orchardists within cities to help make our groups, and therefore orchards, more resilient. We do this through organising regional orchard summits where groups can network, learn new skills and there is often some sort of participatory fundraising element, where groups can bid for small pots of money to improve their orchards. These are very inspiring and engaging events.

We also have roving groups of volunteers, led by our course graduates, who are able to provide a full day of intense aftercare in an orchard. This gives the local group a boost, especially if they have low numbers involved and also increases the confidence in orchard care both for the local group and the volunteers involved.

Our model of community engagement around community orchards is involved, staff intensive and takes place over a few years. This is how we found we can make the biggest difference in communities but it is an expensive model. At the moment we are looking at how we can scale what we do in a less resource intense way so we can reach more people. One of the ways we can do this is to train people in new cities through our accredited courses who then run their own projects. But we also recognise that we need to work with bigger partners as we are only a small national charity. This is to help achieve our vision of everyone living within walking distance of a well-cared for urban orchard and have these trees established and thriving as we enter climate change.