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It's crunch time!



APPLE Day, on October 21, is an annual celebration of the humble fruit and there are events happening all over the country. It was launched in 1990 by the Common Ground charity to focus on hundreds of apple varieties which are grown but little known. Search 'apple day' on nationaltrust.org.uk and you'll find family apple picking at Glastonbury Tor, cider sampling at Cliveden, and apple identification at Nostell Priory. Events at theorchardproject.org.uk range from apple pressing to orchard fundraisers. Head to the Orchard Network events listing page of the ptes.org website, where a nationwide searchable map will show you the closest Apple Day celebrations to you.

PHOTOS: MARTIN HAMBLETON; CARMEN VALINO; PHIL WILKINSON



APPLE OF OUR

Community orchards are blossoming in unexpected urban areas and it's not just the fruit that is bringing its rewards, says **Claire Coleman**

THINK of an orchard and you probably think of a space surrounded by rustic farmland, or rolling green hills. You probably don't think of one sitting cheek by jowl with council estates and ring roads. But urban orchards are increasingly becoming a feature of the metropolitan landscape, thanks to The Orchard Project, a national charity dedicated to the creation, restoration and celebration of community orchards, and Helping Britain Blossom, which helps communities plant, care for and restore orchards.

Most of us might like the idea of more greenery in the unrelenting grey of a cityscape and are aware of the environmental benefits. Academic studies show urban orchards improve community cohesion, surroundings and biodiversity and reduce loneliness. They also provide people with skills, which can help boost employment prospects, as well as being a valuable source of nutritious, free fruit.

The Orchard Project started in October 2014 and has worked with more than 150

groups, from London to Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and beyond. 'We've helped plant 52 new orchards and restored 101,' programme director Claire Morris, (pictured) tells me. '90 per cent of those are in urban areas.'

The orchards may be as few as five trees or as many as 60. While all new orchards are planted with trees that will grow to a medium height – 'to be easy to harvest', – and are two and four years old – 'to ensure that they succeed', – what varieties are down to the community.



'They might be apple trees, plum trees, cherry trees, even walnut trees, and we encourage people to research traditional varieties that might be local to them.'

Initially, it was a question of going to groups and getting them interested, but increasingly groups are seeking out The Orchard Project with ideas about how to transform unused land into something worth

'Studies show urban orchards improve community cohesion, biodiversity and reduce loneliness'

celebrating. 'Each community group has an orchard leader,' explains Claire. 'We'll teach them about different types of pruning, pests and diseases, how to maintain the orchard with mulching and weeding, how to encourage biodiversity and much more. We'll also talk to them about how to promote the orchard to other people – because the real success comes from lots of hands getting involved. We encourage them to organise things around Apple Day in October, and wassail events in January to attract more volunteers.'

Last year, The Orchard Project harvested two tonnes of dessert and culinary apples from community orchards, gardens and wild spaces across London. Apples were hand pressed, fermented and bottled at the Herne Hill Cider House to create a very special cider, named Local Fox, available in shops and bars across the capital. The profits went back to the orchards that were harvested.

Another in Leeds will ask people from different backgrounds to cook dishes using the fruit, while an orchard in Manchester sends its fruit to food banks and homeless shelters. 'Other communities want to know about juicing, about making fruit leathers, jams and chutneys. It's really up to them,' says Claire.

Find your nearest orchard at helpingbritainblossom.org.uk/find-an-orchard/

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EYES

COTTINGLEY HALL, LEEDS

You don't have to live in the country to have an orchard

WITH 1,200 residents on the Cottingley Hall estate in Leeds, a small orchard wasn't an option. So in February last year, volunteers planted the first 50 of a proposed 100-tree, mile-long avenue. Their orchard – which comprises varieties of apple, plum, pear, mulberry, olive, walnut, sweet chestnut and almond – has the intercity railway at one end, a ring road encircling it and the M621 junction at the other end.

Alan Thornton, Helping Britain Blossom Leeds project manager, says: 'The location is testimony to the fact that you don't have to live in the country to have a community orchard. What you do need is a passionate group of people to take on its care, which is what Cottingley Hall has with its dedicated Cottingley In Bloom volunteers, who've been known to plant 7,000 daffodil

bulbs in less than two hours! They've got the enthusiasm. Our involvement is to provide the knowledge, tools and trees needed to create a sustainable orchard.'

The orchard provides a healthy outdoor activity for people of all ages and an opportunity to meet fellow residents.



Neil Whiting, of Cottingley In Bloom, says: 'There are a lot of people in the tower blocks who keep to themselves, as well as people living in sheltered accommodation and those with special needs. The

orchard is a wonderful vehicle through which to integrate the diverse communities that live here. Having something physical to do which unites everyone is less intimidating than turning up at a coffee morning. Gardening is a great leveller, because everyone gets dirt beneath their finger nails and they're in the outdoors, joining in a healthy pastime as well.'



ALEXANDRA PARK, GLASGOW

We don't have an orchard any more, we have a food forest

FORGET an orchard, Glasgow doesn't do things by halves. When residents got together in March 2016 it was to start a 1.2acre 'food forest' in Alexandra Park. The 68-tree orchard includes Scottish heritage apple, plum and pear varieties with mulberry, quince, walnut and almonds specially selected for their hardiness in Scotland's climate.

The idea was that of resident Clementine Sandison, who was then Helping Britain Blossom's manager for Scotland. After consultation with the council, Helping Britain Blossom and residents instigated the development – including free fruit for all.

'Community orchards are wonderful assets, bringing people together from different backgrounds to socialise,

develop new skills and reconnect with nature,' says Clem. The orchard is modelled on a woodland ecosystem which, Clem says, 'means it's low maintenance, resilient to climate change, provides food for wildlife and a huge diversity of fresh seasonal fruit, nuts, herbs and berries that you just can't buy in the shops. With the support of Helping Britain Blossom we can help provide the knowledge and skills needed for the community to nurture the trees and see this food forest thrive.' There are also pruning workshops, blossom celebrations, jam

making and school visits.



It's a place where people can connect with the neighbours in a 'real' way

A FORGOTTEN area of a 1950s council estate in Lambeth was transformed when volunteers from the Rosendale Gardens Estate Tenants Residents Association (TRA) planted 11 fruit trees – mulberry, apple, fig, apricot, cherry, plum and pear in February 2016. TRA member Poppy

ROSENDALE GARDEN ESTATES, LONDON

George (pictured) who has lived on the estate with her family for eight years, and fellow resident Patrick McCabe, undertook orchard training with Helping Britain Blossom. Poppy believes its benefits go way beyond the free fruit

which will be available to all residents once the trees are established.

Poppy says: 'What we are creating is a very special community resource – particularly for those on the estate who don't have gardens, where people can

interact with each other and connect with their neighbours in a "real" way.

'As well as learning new horticulture skills, children and their families will learn more about where their food comes from – and will then have the chance to cook with it in the community centre kitchen, and it will provide

a great meeting point for tenants who may not even have met each other before, even though they live nearby.

'We want people to feel part of something special that they can be proud of, not just now but for future generations too.'

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