

FACT SHEET 4

Orchards



Historically Gloucestershire has been an important area for fruit growing and our remaining old orchards are of national significance.

The oldest orchards are generally the most important ones. They may appear neglected yet often contain mature trees of traditional varieties of perry pears, cider or eating apples and plums, damsons or greengages. The wildlife too is rich: a 2004 survey in a traditional orchard in the Wyre Forest (Worcestershire) recorded an astonishing 1868 species.

These traditional orchards may be the last remaining reservoirs of the genetic stock of distinctive fruit varieties, such as the Dymock Red and the Blaisdon Plum. There are about 100 Gloucestershire varieties of apple, 100 of perry pear and 16 plum cultivars still in existence.

The wildlife found in old orchards is also varied, as well as the trees themselves, the grassland underneath may be rich in wildflowers, they are likely to be enclosed by dense hedgerows and ponds may be found too. All of these habitats support a wealth of birds, butterflies and other insects.

The key to the management of old orchards for wildlife is:

- To ensure that no pesticides, herbicides or artificial fertilizers are used
- To maintain a mosaic of habitats such as scrub, dead wood, hedgerows and ponds in the vicinity of the orchard
- To create a network of traditionally managed orchards in the landscape, rather than isolated individual sites.

HOW TO FIND OUT WHAT YOU'VE GOT?

The best way to do this is to undertake a survey or series of observations. Varieties of fruit tree may be difficult to identify but there is help available both online and through various apple days and orchard events. Contact the Gloucestershire Orchard Group at:

www.gloucestershireorchardgroup.org.uk/



Next, map the orchard, marking on the position of existing and dead trees and any other important features, such as ponds, hedges, areas of scrub, footpaths etc.

WHAT TO DO NEXT? —————

The management of the grassland under the trees will depend on its existing wildflowers and on your opportunities to manage it. It could be grazed or managed as a hay meadow. See Meadows Fact Sheet.

The management of the existing trees is important and depends on the age and condition of them. If in doubt it is best to get a professional assessment done before starting any work. In general terms, apples and pears can be pruned in the winter months. The first step is to remove any dead or diseased branches, then look for branches which are crossing and rubbing against each other. These may also need removing in order to prevent damage being caused and disease getting in. Pruning should aim to result in an open structure, with a 'wine glass' shape, so plenty of open in the middle of the tree and the branches forming a cup shape to allow plenty of air and sunlight in to aid fruit production.

Similar principles apply to stone fruit such as plums; however these should not be pruned in the winter, and should be left until late spring to reduce the chances of the tree developing diseases. Always make sure that any cuts you make are clean and don't leave jagged edges, and always cut back to an outward facing bud.



Any trees which have already died should ideally be left in-situ. Standing dead wood provides an invaluable habitat for insects and over 400 species have been recorded in old orchards including the rare Noble chafer beetle which is only found in this habitat, as well as providing habitat for hole nesting birds such as Great spotted and Green woodpeckers and Treecreeper. However, if the trees have to be removed then try to leave the dead wood in a pile somewhere within the orchard.

PLANTING NEW TREES —————

If you are planting new fruit trees to rejuvenate an existing orchard, or to create a new one, the first thing to do is to decide how many trees you need. Traditional orchards are characterised by widely spaced standard fruit trees and if you are rejuvenating an existing orchard you should follow the planting pattern which has been used previously. When planting a new orchard, planting densities depend on the tree species: apples are generally planted 8-10 metres apart, pears and cherries further apart still, while plums can be planted more densely.

When choosing which type of fruit and then which variety to plant it is worth considering what is already in your orchard or what is found nearby, as well as considering the final use for the fruit. Are you planning on harvesting the fruit for domestic use? In which case choose something you are going to enjoy eating. There are hundreds of traditional varieties, although some are not particularly tasty, but do find out which were planted in the area in the past to see if these are available again.

Most garden centres and nurseries stock fruit trees, although if you are looking for more traditional varieties you may need to visit a specialist:

www.realenglishfruit.co.uk/

www.dayscottage.co.uk

www.lodgefarmtrees.co.uk

www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk

www.weloveplums.com

Planting is a job to be undertaken in the winter months, between November and March, but not when the ground is frozen or waterlogged. It is important to care for the tree before planting and not let the roots dry out.

Dig a hole large enough for the roots of the tree, and break up the soil in the bottom of the hole. Place a stake in the hole and bang it in until it is firm, it should be no longer than 1/3rd of the height of the tree. Place the tree in the hole, spread out the roots and carefully replace the soil, making sure that it gets into the gaps around the roots. Firm the soil down and attach the tree to the stake using a soft tree tie. You may need to protect your trees from animals such as

rabbits or livestock and either a tree guard or a more substantial tree shelter might be needed. If the first growing season is a particularly hot one then you may need to water the trees. You should also make sure that the tree does not get swamped by existing vegetation, and may need to mulch around the tree to reduce competition in the first year.

Managing the trees once planted should follow the same basic principles to those mentioned above for existing trees; removing dead and diseased wood first, then crossing or rubbing branches and cutting back to outward facing buds to get an open structure to the tree.



FURTHER READING

Natural England have produced an extensive range of advice notes on the conservation, restoration and creation of traditional orchards, including: TIN020 – Traditional orchards: orchards and wildlife which can be downloaded from: www.naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/publications/farming-environmental%20land%20management

Native Apples of Gloucestershire by Charles Martell (2008) downloadable from the Gloucestershire Orchard Group website: www.gloucestershireorchardgroup.org.uk/directories/publications/

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