

Orchards for the 21st century

Scotland's fruit orchards have largely disappeared, yet John Hancox, Director of the Children's Orchard, believes orchards will have a new and vital place in our future.

About 15 years ago, in a previous life as an environmental journalist, I asked Glasgow's Parks Department why there are no fruit trees in public parks. It took a while and some prodding to get an answer: "People would eat the fruit."

Fast-forward to the present. I have started up an initiative to get fruit trees planted in parks and at schools and hospitals, and have encouraged local authorities and organisations to 'twig' that fruit grows on trees, and that it's good to eat. The Children's Orchard, of which I am Director, has worked across the Central Belt and beyond, planting several thousand fruit trees in hundreds of schools and with communities, and is now a Scotland-wide project.

So, are Scotland's orchards in decline or enjoying a resurgence? For many decades, traditional orchards have been in relentless decline due to high labour costs, land values and cheap fruit imports from around the world. By and large, there are no commercial orchards remaining in Scotland, and most of the traditional orchards in areas like the Clyde valley, Carse o' Gowrie, East Lothian and the Forth Valley have been grubbed up and built on; what remains has been neglected.

Along with the orchards have gone the culture and knowledge to grow and care for fruit trees and their produce. Perhaps the greatest loss is the folk knowledge that has disappeared with our orchards. It's harder to measure than the physical loss of orchards but arguably the hardest to replace. In Scotland there are only a small handful of people who really know how to graft and prune fruit trees. They are typically retired and some of them are not in the best of health. This loss of skills is the true crisis facing Scottish orchards.

And yet I'm basically optimistic about the future of fruit growing in Scotland. Apples and pears were brought here long ago. Around the 11th century, monks planted orchards in abbeys and monasteries as part of a Papal Decree and this has led to a long tradition of fruit growing on religious sites which continues today.

Long before that, apples had migrated along the Silk Road east and west from the wild apple forests of Kazakhstan. The appeal of apples from the Garden of Eden onwards has ensured people planted them and looked after them. It's a great gift to the future after all, and one which people still understand.

A new, local fruit growing

The survival of traditional orchards is by no means guaranteed, and who knows if they have much of a future. As long as the market for local fruit is destabilised by fruit imports, it is not obvious how the old model could work. But some sort of new, local fruit growing – orchards for the 21st century – seems pretty much a certainty.

In the last 18 years, Butterworth's Organic Nursery has sent out 30,000 trees, many have been sourced from other nurseries and right now there is a boom in sales of fruit trees at garden centres and nurseries. This leads one to ask where all these fruit trees are going and what Scotland's orchards and fruit growing will be like in the future.

Typically, these new orchards are being planted by community councils, schools, voluntary groups, allotment groups and a whole range

of individuals. Planting trees for community benefit, rather than for profit, seems to be the core value. A lot of fruit trees are going into private and community gardens, often as part of developers' plans. The idea of introducing orchards into towns and cities close to where people live makes so much sense. They are being planted mainly for the fun of picking and eating the fruit, and of course the enjoyment of the blossom.

Over the past few years, the Children's Orchard has worked with hundreds of schools and community groups, planting thousands of trees with thousands of children, families and their communities. From among these many young people are the new recruits who will be the key to a new orchard movement for the 21st century.



Perhaps the greatest loss is the folk knowledge that has disappeared with Scotland's orchards.

The Children's Orchard lets children plant their own trees, to see their own fruit growing. Both the children and the apples flourish in this way. So many children growing up in urban areas have never seen where fruit comes from or had the pleasure of picking and eating straight from the tree. It's a wonderful experience – I remember picking ripe plums in my aunt's garden when I was two – and it's something all youngsters should have the chance to enjoy. And of course, it's a scientific fact that things taste better when you grow and pick them yourself.

The great thing about putting children at the heart of the Children's



Putting children at the heart of the Children's orchard draws all sorts of ordinary people into the project.

Orchard is that it draws all sorts of ordinary people into the project. We involve families, schools, social workers, businesses and all kinds of folk who wouldn't usually get involved in a serious horticultural project. Anyone can dig a hole and plant a tree – it's really not a hard thing to do, and the aim of the Children's Orchard is to demystify the process and make it something which everyone can be part of, whether they are children or adults.

Climate change is clearly a factor that will affect the growing of fruit in Scotland as this century advances. Fruit growing here is at its northern fringe, yet global warming is likely to allow some new varieties to thrive in Scotland and will also extend the range to higher ground and areas further north. It will change what is possible. In addition, peak oil and the higher costs of importing food will add value to the orchards and other food plants being planted now.

2,014 trees for the 'commonweal'
The new 21st century orchards – which are currently being planted for community benefit – chime with the newest project of the Children's Orchard. The Commonwealth Orchard aims to plant 2,014 fruit trees across Scotland now, so that, come the 2014 Games, the trees will be established, acting as a permanent legacy of the Games.

The word Commonwealth is an interesting one. Though it is now associated with the British Empire, it is an old concept related to the common good or the old Scots word 'commonweal' – which is to do with looking after the poor and vulnerable of the parish. The hope is that the new orchards being planted will strengthen the communities which nurture them.

Maintenance is a key requirement, and we have recognised that the thousands of trees that have been planted will need to be looked after in the long term. To achieve this, we formed a Scottish Orchards

membership group in January 2009 to draw together a range of people who want to be a part of a more fruitful Scotland. Mapping existing fruit trees, organising training and networking events, organising apple days, and publicising news and local events in the *Fruitful Scotland* newsletter all seem to be helpful in developing the 21st century orchards.

We see the new orchards being planted and looked after for the benefit of the community, on a voluntary basis. The hope is also that Scottish Orchards becomes a coherent voice for orchards across Scotland to help secure this legacy. We are delighted that John Butterworth of Butterworth's Organic Nursery has offered to be patron of this group, which anyone is welcome to join.

Our experience is that fruit growing is part of a wider picture – it is a good way for people to start producing their own food without a very high cost. Fruit trees also do not require a huge amount of care. If people get the food growing bug, they are likely to have a try at growing other food plants too.

Things have changed a lot in the 15 years since I wrote the piece on the lack of fruit trees in parks. Now, the idea of planting fruit trees in towns, cities and close to where people live is one that is seen as commonsense.

Planting fruit trees is a practical way to change the world. Be it as edible carbon offset or a way to reduce fruit miles, it's a very satisfying thing to do, as well as a positive contribution to the future. And who knows where this madness may lead... once people plant fruit trees, they often start to think of other changes. Perhaps one day we will have farming in parks. Why not have sheep to cut the grass instead of lawnmowers – radical perhaps, but give it 15 another years!

Find out more
www.childrensorcharard.co.uk
www.commonwealthorchard.com
www.scottishorchards.com

To get involved or join Scottish Orchards, contact John Hancox on john.d.hancox@btinternet.com or mobile 0778 606 3918.