

# Sheffield the Orchard City?



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Summer falls into autumn with the plums. We are standing at four corners of an old bed sheet ready for the downpour; a brisk shake and we are pelted by soft, dusty fruits. Quick hands sort the harvest and we go home, pockets, bags and rucksacks bulging to make chutneys, jams, wine or just to gorge on nature's sugar. This was Sheffield in September and part of this year's bumper harvest of fruit and nuts. I asked Richard Clara, expert organic grower and founder of SOFI (Sheffield Organic Food Initiative) if he could show me a sample of some of the fruit trees that could be found across Sheffield. On a chilly November morning we started off in the Ponderosa community orchard near Crookes Valley Park that Sheffield Wildlife Trust helped to plant. At this time of year most of the fruits have been harvested. Evidence of ongoing checking and picking is etched in the grass-beaten paths that meander between trees.

We stop by a recently harvested Medlar – a low tree with a curious fruit, which looks like a cross between a rose hip and a small pear. The Medlar fruit sweetens and turns soft through a process called 'bletting' brought on by the first frost, or if stored indoors. It then turns into a pulp similar to apple sauce. There are hazelnuts too (if you can get them before the squirrels) as well as pears, apples and plums.

We visit several orchard allotments at Hagg Lane, stopping on the way to admire a huge eucalyptus, which forms a towering focal point at the centre of this cluster of hedged



rectangles. On this site, fruit trees make good use of the challenging heavy clay soil and north facing slopes and can yield hundreds of kilos of fruit per year. There are apples, hazelnut, walnut, plums, greengage and even a nectarine. We talk about the cultural and psychological importance of planting fruit trees – definitely part of the slow food movement, since many take several years before they start yielding fruit, and even then their harvest can be erratic. Planting a tree is a sign of hope for the future, an investment in the longer-term – the kind of action that defies a culture of instant gratification. Fruit trees provide a vital wildlife habitat: for birds, insects and mammals as well as adding beauty and interest to the urban landscape – the rich biodiversity supported by fruit orchards has only recently been fully recognised. Another advantage is that once they are growing they require minimal maintenance and repay your efforts many times over. My previous allotment was home to an apple tree that had been planted by the previous holder's father from a pip during the Second World War. It's these stories that knit people together; that speak across generations.

Fruit trees and orchards are an important part of our cultural heritage. Common Ground, an organisation which makes links between the arts and the environment has, since 1990 been running an extensive national campaign to celebrate and protect orchards and local distinctiveness. This includes the extremely successful Apple Day festivals of which there were several events taking place in Sheffield this year. Their website states that until recently every farm, country house



and suburban garden had its own collection of fruit trees.

During our rounds, I get to sample a few of the 30 rare apple varieties that Richard has grown on local allotments. I learn that many varieties keep well in cool conditions and I am reminded of my mother's tales of her aunt's tiny third bedroom in the 1940s, stuffed all winter with newspaper wrapped apples. To think that most supermarkets fly apples to us when we could keep them under the bed! With an eye to the future, we visited the largely overgrown site at Highcliffe which could be claimed to be developing by itself into a forest orchard. After many years of low-key cultivation many of the allotments seem to be blending into the surrounding woodlands in a naturalistic way creating a mix of wild and cultivated trees. We also visit Hagg House and Rivelin Valley where about 500 unused allotments have all but melted back into the woodland. The task of clearing



this land would require a truly pioneering effort and a forest orchard looks like an exciting and viable option in this context.

The jury is out as to how climate change will impact on fruit trees in this country. Some



commentators believe warmer summers will extend the possibilities of fruit cropping, others fear the loss of winter chill that many trees need to encourage fruit and blossom. George Monbiot, Oxford-based author of the recently published Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning, an exploratory quest into the strategies needed to radically reduce carbon emissions, sees growing his own food as an active way of reducing food miles and his carbon footprint. Heat is, in his own words, "both a manifesto for action and a thought experiment". He has taken on five allotments and is managing four of these for fruit, along with a group of friends. In the political arena, Environment Secretary David Miliband recently emphasised the importance of local, seasonal food as part of the solution to global climate change.

With perennials such as fruit trees this means planting now and perhaps one day Sheffield will be known as The Orchard City...

For more information on Apple Day and local apple tree events that took place in Sheffield: [www.commonground.org.uk/appleday/appleday.html](http://www.commonground.org.uk/appleday/appleday.html)

For details of George Monbiot's allotment/orchard experience: [www.monbiot.com/archives/2006/10/01/growing-my-own/tmore-965](http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2006/10/01/growing-my-own/tmore-965)

Sheffield Organic Food Initiative will be organising a series of workshops on fruit planting and permaculture over the winter. Tel: 0114 268 6727 [www.organic-guru.co.uk](http://www.organic-guru.co.uk)

