

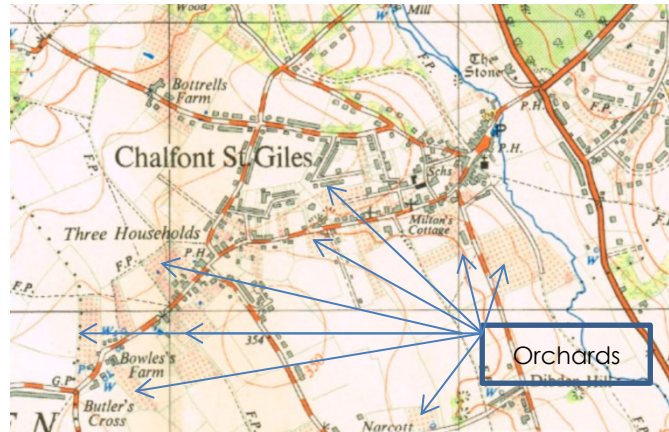
Proposal for a Community Orchard at Chalfont St Giles

Introduction

If the pandemic has shown us anything, it's the importance of having more outdoor spaces where we can relax, play, learn and work together safely.

As the extract from a 1923 map below shows, Chalfont St Giles was once home to many orchards, and there are still some residents who remember them. So it's sad, that while all the parishes that we share boundaries with have established community orchards, or the parish council has at least funded some trees to recognise that heritage, we have little to show of that heritage except street names.

2022 is the Queen's platinum jubilee year and we are all being encouraged to plant a tree for the jubilee. While the focus of this initiative has been on woodland and garden trees, what better way of recognising the Queen's dedication to the country than to create an orchard where we can all appreciate the outdoors and learn more about our heritage and wildlife which could leave a lasting legacy for future generations to enjoy. The map shows the orchards just three years before the Queen was born.



In 2007 traditional orchards were designated as a Priority Habitat under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP). Additionally, the Government is urging us all to "plant for our planet". This is an initiative led by Defra to "encourage individuals, communities and businesses to help protect the natural world, either by starting a new activity or joining an existing project" ahead of COP26 the UN Climate Change Conference being held in Glasgow in November, 2021.

The Proposal

This initial proposal has been developed by the Committee of Chalfont St Giles Gardens Association. It should not be considered a final plan, as we recognise that to be a true community orchard we will need to take account of the views of the wider community and seek expert advice.

We would like to create an organic community orchard, one we can all share, that can help revive forgotten skills and an interest in our fruit growing heritage. We should like the orchard to become a valuable and valued addition to village life, offering the opportunity for cross-generational involvement in a community project.

Plants and trees have many positive impacts on the environment and people's wellbeing. Our ambition is for the community orchard to become a focal point for community activities and festivals such as wassailing, blossom day and apple day, wildlife open days, picnics, skill-building and story-telling events as well as a green haven in which to relax and wind-down. Once the trees are established, we would also like to introduce a wild flower meadow within the orchard to increase biodiversity, add colour, interest and, perhaps most importantly, help neutralise CO2 emissions and support a huge range of wildlife.

While the project is being developed, the Gardens Association Committee is happy to facilitate this initiative. We have a constitution, are affiliated to the RHS and as such have insurance as well as access to expert advice, so rather than start from scratch this seems like the best option initially. In time, we would look to develop a partnership with the wider community and the Parish Council. All the evidence suggests that the pandemic and lockdowns have heightened appreciation for local parks and green spaces and greater interest in working with nature and we understand that Back Lane Allotments currently has a waiting list of 20. So it would be good to channel that interest into a community orchard.

Potential Sites

We have identified two potential sites, both are privately owned and we will be approaching the landowners to see if they will consider partnering with the community to create a community orchard. Both are close to the village centre and would fulfil our ambitious plans.



One is an established but neglected orchard in need of restoration and additional planting. It is on green belt land and is ecologically rich. The other is currently laid to grass and would provide the opportunity to think creatively and plan and plant a completely new orchard. If both are available, there is a case for progressing them at the same time. Following restoration, the existing orchard might be productive sooner than the newly planted orchard which would need time to establish.

If we are able to progress on either site or both, we would need to commission an ecological survey and orchard restoration and management plan to understand how best to manage the land and preserve what is there already.

If neither site is available, then we would seek support from the Parish Council to help identify other options, but it is unlikely that a site could be found for more than a few clusters of fruit trees, so our ambitions would have to be scaled back.

Costs and Potential Sources of Funding

Until a site is secured, it is not possible to calculate the cost of the project but we have been advised to allow at least £50 per tree and probably more if the size of the orchard does not bring economies of scale.

There are several grants available for the restoration of neglected orchards including PTES orchard grants. Our enquiries suggest that there would be no problem in securing adequate funding to plant a new orchard. Once the orchard is restored or planted, funds will be required to care for the trees, maintenance of the site and equipment. It would also be very beneficial to seek funding to train some volunteers on fruit tree care and maintenance.

The Gardens Association has reserved some of the proceeds from our plant sale for this project but it is unlikely to be sufficient bearing in mind ongoing costs.

A bid could be made for a grant from the Community Board as well as the HS2 Community and Environment Fund and other similar funding pots both from charitable bodies, government and local authorities.

Additionally, we could invite individuals and businesses to sponsor a tree, although we have been advised that this should not be in perpetuity, but for a period of no more than 5 years.

Reasonable charges could be made for training and special events and once the orchard is productive, produce could be sold. The goal would be for the orchard to become self-sufficient once established.

Benefits

Establishing a Community orchard would offer many benefits to the residents of Chalfont St Giles, old and young, as well as helping to address the global challenge of climate change. Some of these benefits are listed below:

Educational

- Providing an educational resource for the local schools, youth club, scout and guide movements where they can learn about healthy eating, the history of fruit growing and appreciate the diversity of life associated with orchards;
- Increasing public awareness about climate change, carbon capture and how we should live with nature;
- Providing training for volunteers on fruit tree planting and maintenance, grafting and perhaps wildlife surveying, giving them the skills to manage and maintain the orchard.
- Teaching culinary skills when there is a glut of produce.

Social

- Improving well-being by creating an attractive space, a place to relax ,unwind and engage with nature;
- Encouraging volunteers to be active and rediscover the simple pleasure of growing fresh fruit;
- Bringing people together, reducing isolation, by providing a place to meet others and form new friendships;
- Promoting the health benefits of growing and eating fruit - a food-growing hub, perhaps helping feed those who are less well off;
- Establishing community cooking sessions to enjoy making cakes, preserves and juices together and perhaps forming a cider club;
- Creating an outdoor community centre where people of different ages and backgrounds can come together to work and have fun by hosting occasional events such as Apple Day and Wassailing;
- Strengthening the community spirit by building links between diverse groups of people and helping to develop a sense of pride of place.



Environmental

- Helping reduce our impact on climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide, removing and storing carbon while releasing oxygen back into the air - Apple trees

can fix between 10-20 tonnes of CO₂ per acre every year and release 15 tonnes of oxygen. (Dr. Alan Lakso, Cornell University.);

- Orchards can support very high biodiversity, including plants, mosses, fungi, lichens and invertebrates;
- Trees provide nesting sites, food and shelter for birds;
- Helping to preserve uncommon and local varieties of fruit – though this might have to be balanced with the planting of more productive croppers.
- Orchard trees help to improve air quality by intercepting and trapping dust and other pollutants from the air.
- Leaf canopies help buffer the falling rain and their roots hold the soil in place, encouraging the water to seep into the ground rather than run off.

Economic

Clearly, there are economic benefits for all of the points cited above. It could also be argued that an accessible community orchard might attract additional visitors contributing to the local economy. However, one of the aims is for the proposed community orchard to be self-sufficient. Therefore any profit made from its produce ie. juices, cider, jams and chutneys would be ploughed back to fund the maintenance of the orchard.

Challenges and Risks

Note; this list should not be considered complete. It is being put together by enthusiastic amateurs, so there will no doubt be other challenges ahead.

Finding the right site - Locating a site suitable for growing an orchard might well be the greatest challenge. It will need to meet the right environmental conditions to ensure new trees have the greatest success. Choosing the right varieties that are compatible with the environmental conditions will be important.

Involvement - The success of the project relies heavily on community and volunteer involvement. Volunteers move on but orchards are forever! After the first flush of excitement, and before the trees are productive, will it be possible to maintain the enthusiasm? While the promotion of learning new skills such as pruning and grafting can help retain interest, weeding around the trees might be less appealing to volunteers. We will need to ensure that the project appeals to all ages and level of expertise. Engaging with conservation volunteer groups such as the Green Gym might be a solution and we have been in touch with them.



Scale - while it might feel prudent to be cautious when embarking on creating a new orchard, getting the scale right is important. Too many trees to care for might become a chore, too few might not engender sufficient interest to attract volunteers and the community interaction envisaged.

Ongoing Costs - while it is anticipated that funding to start the orchard will be forthcoming, it's important to ensure that there sufficient money is retained in a contingency fund before the orchard can generate income. This will be needed to replace failed trees, repair and maintenance of stock guards, stakes and ties and pay for any unexpected expert advice.

Water - it is vital that the orchard has easy access to water. Regular watering will be important during the first few years before the trees are established and thereafter during periods of drought. Ideally water should be harvested as it would be better for the trees and

soil micro-organisms., but it might not be realistic. So, the cost of mains water would need to be included in the budget, particularly if it has to be installed.

Storage - consideration should be given to how and where to store tools and equipment as well as composting leaves in the autumn. While it may be possible to rely on the use of volunteers' tools and equipment, some large and heavy items such as wheel barrows and ladder are difficult to transport.

Accessibility – it's essential that the community orchard is accessible to everyone so it will be vital to consult widely and seek advice from experts. Additional grants may be available to help with some costs.

Vandalism - it is a sad fact that this has to be considered, but by engaging the community, instilling a sense of pride and encouraging everyone to play a part in the community orchard's development from the outset, it is hoped that incidents of vandalism will be avoided.

What Happens Next

This is the timetable we should like to work towards in the short term, however we recognise that it might be ambitious and there will undoubtedly be some slippage:

Summer/Autumn 2021	Potential sites identified
	Agreements reached with landowner(s)
Autumn 2021	Consultation with the wider community and experts
	Orchard Committee established
	Volunteers recruited
	Ecological survey, planting and management plan commissioned
	Preparatory works begin
	Tree sponsorship opens
	Funding applications submitted
Winter 2021	Funding secured
	Volunteer training commences
	Tree planting event
Ongoing	Management programme and activities to be agreed annually

Further Advice and Guidance

We have consulted with one of the founders of [Chorleywood Community Orchard](#), a large orchard with over 140 trees. She has been inspirational and an invaluable source of first-hand knowledge and information. She has offered to share her experience at a consultation meeting, should we get that far.

There are a number of excellent websites that provide more detailed information on all aspects of orchards

- <https://ptes.org/campaigns/traditional-orchard-project/orchard-network/>
- <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/grow-your-own/fruit>
- <https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk/guides-and-advice/>
- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/public-urged-to-plant-for-our-planet-in-a-new-campaign-launched-today>
- <https://theecologist.org/2011/may/06/what-community-orchard>
- <https://orchardpeople.com/community-orchard-projects-that-inspire/>
- <https://www.carbonoffsettrees.co.uk/planting-apple-orchards>