

Productive Community Orchards – making Welsh local food systems environmentally resilient

June 2023

Resilient Green Spaces was a £1.27m partnership project to pilot alternative re-localised food systems and community-led green spaces in Wales that run until June 2023. As part of this, Social Farms and Gardens supported the development of new community orchard sites and innovative systems for fruit production, storage and processing.

This series of case studies aims to showcase the economic, environmental and social benefits their support has nurtured, as well as to share practical learning to inspire others who might be on a similar journey, across a wide variety of organizational set ups and range of land ownership arrangements. This one focuses on environmental benefits of the support at two sites, **Sutton Mountain Common** supported by **Lambston Parish Residents Association**, and **Maes Glasfryn** site created by **EcoDewi** in St Davids.

Introducing the sites

Sutton Mountain is a 90-acre common three miles west of Haverfordwest. It is owned by Camrose Community Council and has 10 registered graziers but no active grazing. In 2020 the **Lambston Parish Residents' Association (LPRA)** agreed at their AGM that they would start to become involved in the management of the common because access, enjoyment and biodiversity was being lost to a sea of bracken with rapidly encroaching scrub. The Association is a small community organization with a budget of only around £500 per year covering an area of the old parish of Lambston which includes around 100 households in total.

Progress was delayed by Covid but in autumn 2021 the group agreed that they would like to see more paths on the common, the existing rights of way improved and planted with fruit trees both to encourage pollinators and improve biodiversity but also to create a way to engage the local community in the common. In January 2022 the group started to clear a path through dense scrub and across very wet and boggy areas to come out onto the open common. Local volunteers made the initial opening but countryside students from Pembrokeshire College installed pipes to make a culverted stream crossing and added waymarks, National Park Volunteers and local volunteers improved the path drainage and work has continued to improve the path to the present day. In March 2022 a group of 15 local volunteers planted 40 fruit trees.

Founded just before a lockdown in 2020, **EcoDewi** focuses on tackling the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis whilst simultaneously improving community wellbeing on the St Davids Peninsula. As part of their work, they wanted to support community orchards but finding land and funding was a barrier. They started with a small community garden and created a mini orchard with 8 Welsh heritage apple trees and one fig tree. In 2022, EcoDewi heard about a local private landowner who was keen to protect a field from future development. After some initial conversations the Maes Glasfryn project was born with aims to increase community access to green spaces and improve local biodiversity. As part of this project, EcoDewi was keen to create a large community orchard neighbouring a new housing development and for all elements of the community to be able to help create, manage and enjoy the fruits of their labour.

What support did they receive from Resilient Green Spaces?

Although **the LPRA** did not exactly meet the support criteria the association felt that as a sub-community-council organization working on an abandoned common, the project could be of some wider relevance socially and environmentally. Over two years, the LPRA received 80 trees (apples, damsons and nuts) and guards, mats, stakes, ties and secateurs and loppers for pruning and two tons of woodchip. Heavy growth of bracken and bramble threatened the progress of the trees which was dealt with by hand in year 1 but with RGS-funded mower in year 2.

Similarly, **EcoDewi** received 52 fruit trees and other equipment, including tree posts, tree guards, wheelbarrows and watering equipment. They also received support with choosing heritage, local varieties, suitable to their weather conditions, and purchasing stock from local tree suppliers where possible. In addition, EcoDewi received advice on legal matters from Community Land Advisory Service to secure community access to the land.

“This support has enabled us to put a community orchard in the heart of St Davids city, on a site that is quickly becoming surrounded by new housing. It's enabled us to create a space that the community will be able to enjoy for generations to come, where free fruit can be accessed and where nature will flourish.” Jeremy, Ecodewi

Challenges and lessons learnt

Planting trees on a common is quite unusual, so engaging with all interested stakeholders was important for **the LPRA**. However, it wasn't easy to work out who the graziers are because the common land registers are out of date and so LPRA mapped ownership with the help from local farmers. They also shared their project plan with the owners of the common, Camrose Community Council, early on and gained consent. The County Council was also contacted and discussions were held with the ecologist and Common land officer. Following on from those a walk over was arranged with a local ecological contractor who knows the site well and was willing to give his time as a community contribution.

Moreover, there is not a stable source of ongoing management funding for the common, even if it has high nature conservation potential. Therefore LPRA relied on smaller grants (Outdoor Connections), in-kind support (Social Farms and gardens) and especially local relationships that proved essential: owners of local kennels agreed to cut planting spaces for trees and space to store trees when they arrived and sponsored bird for bird feeders; two local landowners took water in trailers and tanks up to the mountain to water the young trees in summer 2022 droughts or Friends of the National Park who carried out significant surfacing improvement on the path with the aggregate delivered to site by another local farmer.

Creating a new orchard at Maes Glasfryn, **EcoDewi** learnt from the experience of two other community orchards that had been planted in past years. One of them struggled with the environmental conditions of being on the coast with very few trees surviving. The other one was on land owned by a private tourism business which later on decided to extend its buildings, so the orchard needed to be moved and was dispersed around the area to different small sites. Learning from this has helped EcoDewi to choose

more suitable tree varieties sensitive to their local environment and focus more on the long term security of land use for the new site, working with a partner committed to the project in the long term. Given that the land is privately owned, EcoDewi had to demonstrate with correct documentation that it is protected for the community and they are currently working with the landowner to ensure the site is protected in perpetuity.

Key achievements

There are now over 90 fruit and nut trees on **Sutton Mountain Common**, which should, in time significantly increase the biodiversity of the site. As a result of clearing bracken and brambles, creating paths and windbreaks the site is now seeing early increases in flowering plants - orchids, bluebells and foxgloves. Installation of a farm-scale bird feeder aims to provide food for threatened species such as yellow hammers which have declined by about 99% in the last 20 years in Pembrokeshire.

Their planting and subsequent orchard management has engaged over 30 local community volunteers, with age range spanning 4-79 years old and many of them volunteering with the association for the first time. This also resulted in increased attendance in other social events and walks as more people feel interested and confident to attend. LPRA has also developed useful contacts and training opportunities with local organizations such as Cwm Arian, a local community partnership centred on north east Pembrokeshire.

In future, they want to focus on developing a plan for the management of the common, including ecological survey. The plan should also prioritize maintenance of the planting and the paths over new projects which is not easy when most available funding tends to be for capital works. They also want to build more links with organizations doing similar work in Pembrokeshire and to have enough training to look after the trees properly in the long term.

For **EcoDewi**, the biggest achievement was creating a new biodiverse habitat in a built-up area, improving spaces for pollinators and creating 'green corridors'. The site is in a high agricultural and tourism area which has seen a steady decline in biodiversity.

"From a nature point of view, it's vital we create all these little extra habitats and the beautiful thing about orchards is the massive benefit for wildlife plus the massive benefit for food, free and healthy food for locals." Jeremy, Ecodewi

They also found out that heritage varieties have helped them to attract people to the orchard and is part of protecting and sharing local Welsh heritage too. Since the site is surrounded by new housing developments and businesses, people have been also excited about and reassured, seeing some of the land being protected for community use.

Their next goal is to establish volunteering sessions to help with the orchard management and learn from other, more established orchards, for example with Cwm Arian about harvesting and juicing community activities.

Tips for other sites

Charles:

- Being a very local organisation and having good links with landowners through local events has helped us to progress this unusual work. We also had a good track record of initiatives including the establishment of a village green.
- Liaise early and often with the landowners, in our case the community council and with county council (Rights of way, common land and ecology) to prevent any concerns arising from your work
- Involve key stakeholders as early as possible. It has been great to have involvement and advice from one of the Conservation Officers at Pembrokeshire National Park Authority.

Jeremy:

- From the outset ensure you have a very clear understanding of the legal ownership of the land, the implications of that ownership and what changes might need to take place or documentation required. We were fortunate to just get this sorted before the end of the planting season but we were cutting it fine!
- Look at and learn from other projects and organisations. Don't try to reinvent the wheel when others have probably already learnt what to do and what not to do. Try to benefit from this experience early on as it will only benefit and make your project more efficient.
- Seek community input and share some info early on. We were blown away by the positive reaction to our plans and this gave us a huge boost to know we were doing the right thing and that it was definitely wanted by the community. That support is essential to any project but especially larger ones.

Resilient Green Spaces is a £1.27m partnership project being led by Social Farms & Gardens to pilot alternative re-localised food systems using communities and their green spaces as the driving force for change across Wales until June 2023.

The project has received funding through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

Social Farms
& Gardens
Ffermydd a Gerddi
Cymdeithasol

