

Productive Community Orchards – making Welsh local food systems economically 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.

Introducing the sites

Dinefwr Orchardeers is a group of volunteers who take care of an orchard planted in 2012 on National Trust land in Llandeilo. On 1,5 ha they grow 150 trees - mostly apples, but a few pears and cherry too. They work closely with a local specialist tree nurseryman - Appewise Fruit Tree Nursery - who has helped with orchard management. They juice their apples and as the harvests were increasing, together with community demand on their services, in 2021 they decided to establish a specialist facility for processing the juice including bottling and pasteurisation. This was finished by August 2022 and in their first season they made over 4000 bottles of juice from 3 tonnes of apples harvested from their own orchard, and a further 8 tonnes of apples brought to the processing facility by local orchard owners. They hire their equipment to other orchard owners and community groups and so pay back its initial costs raised from between the group. In future, they would like to diversify into cider making, building on members' passions but also supported by contacts gained as part of the Productive Community Orchards.

Aside from their juicing enterprise, they also promote better apple culture and orchard management in the Towy Valley through training courses and support to other orchards. They created a 160-strong local network of apple aficionados with whom they share weekly newsletter to share learning and encourage better tree care.

Summit Good is a Community Supported Agriculture scheme in Dunvant, Swansea serving local customers. Their motto is 'do summit good, grow summit good, eat summit good' and they are passionate about shortening supply chains and producing more local food, including fruit and veg but also chicken and pigs. They share their 3 acre field with 10 other projects - local businesses – a microbrewery, a sauerkraut maker, artisan papermaker, florist and The Orchard Project.

They have lots of community groups coming to the site, such as Men's Shed and Women's Shed, which now help to manage their 3 orchard sites spread over ½ acre.

What support did they receive from Resilient Green Spaces?

Support received from Resilient Green Spaces enabled both sites to scale up their producing and processing capacity. **Dinefwr Orchardeers** acquired various tools and equipment from juice buckets, through timber for new doors for a new 'apple room' to apple press and pasteurising equipment. They have been also drawing on Food Centre Wales advice and expertise to help them to develop their juicing facility.

Summit Good received 40 trees, juicing equipment and fridges. This allowed them to create a clean, more efficient space and increase their capacity to store apples and juice. As a small, busy enterprise they appreciated that they could choose trees and equipment but it was ordered for them by RGS.

Dinefwr Orchardeers attended training days organized by the Productive Community Orchards Network and shared their learning with other orchards in their area, including schools. For **Summit Good**, RGS funded The Orchard Project to continue to mentor their growers and volunteers in designing and taking care of the orchard as well as business planning. Both sites found most valuable hands-on, practical training tailored to their individual needs.

"Witchhazel (from the Orchard Project) is just a wealth of knowledge. It was really helpful to spend two or three hours with her and learn how much to prune and when, the varieties we had and watering and mulching and how to plant, and quite specific to our soil." Josh, Summit Good

Challenges and lessons learnt

Dinefwr Orchardeers were not successful in the first round of applications but they persevered, incorporated feedback and re-applied with success. They also negotiated using the financial support to buy second-hand equipment to gain best value and support their local economy, which was not initially possible. When scaling up their juicing production, they learnt about food hygiene and safety regulations. This included upskilling their volunteers as well as registering as a food production premise with their county council and successfully passing their inspection.

"We only had a very small press, and, and it was hard work pressing, I don't know how many tonnes of apples we pressed last year, but it took more time than it needed to. And the same thing with pasteurising and bottling. We were thinking of scaling it all back and thinking, "we can't do this again!". So with the new equipment, it has given us confidence that we'll be able to do it in less time with fewer people." Phillip, Dinefwr Orchardeers

Before their time, the land **Summit Good** is on was stripped of topsoil, so some trees struggled to get established. After a year, the group had to reposition them and increase feeding and watering, which resulted in healthier trees.

What has been achieved?

Both sites are planning to share their equipment with wider communities which multiplies their value, strengthens local production networks and so makes them more resilient. In coming seasons, new juicing equipment will help **Dinefwr Orchardeers** to become more efficient and increase their production capacity. They currently supply with their juice two community shops, a bakery, a garden centre and hope to expand their market through their network and loyal customer base.

Apple juice will also help **Summit Good** to diversify their veg box offer, especially in a “hungry gap”, as well as supplying a local farm shop. Being co-located with other businesses is also an asset for them as they started to have conversations with a project interested in dehydrating fruit and making fruit swell and fruit leather. They were also able to attract new community members to the site who now help with orchard management and in future juicing, for example home school groups. It has also created a more biodiverse, fenced space where they can graze chickens, with trees protected by tree guards.

“Through our links with The Orchard Projects and Green Spaces in Swansea, the idea is that we can use it as a kitchen and any other groups that needs decent equipment can come and, can come and share it.” Josh, Summit Good

Tips for other sites

Phillip:

Be prepared that it's a lot of hard work.

Ask for support from individuals and businesses in any way you can.

Share your experience and learning with others.

Josh:

Carefully consider the orchard design in terms of root stock, but also what’s happening underneath the trees, whether that’s grazing or creating a meadow.

Think about how the orchard is impacting your local community and how you can involve them in caring for it.

Witchhazel:

Do a good research beforehand about what trees would be suitable for your local area. Consider heritage trees but prioritize varieties that would be resilient to climate change.

Give yourself enough time for planning. Ideally, you would want to order trees in summer for planting in February – March, to ensure you get the best of the stock.

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.

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