

## Productive Community Orchards – making Welsh local food systems socially 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. This one introduces **Growing Spaces in Abergavenny and Dal Dy Dir near Kerry, Powys** and their journey to make their communities more socially resilient.

### Introducing the sites

**Growing Spaces** is a charity supporting individuals with mental ill health, autism or learning disability. Through working outdoors, they help people to build confidence, develop social skills and improve their quality of life. One of their sites in Mardy Park, Abergavenny, is situated on local health board land and backs onto a Resource Centre that provides a variety of outpatient care. They have currently 2 paid staff members who help to take care of the community garden and adjacent park. The space is opened to everybody 24/7 and has a polytunnel, vegetable and flower beds and an old orchard. They provide horticultural courses for volunteers aged 19 – 96 years old and the garden is also visited by pre-school groups.

Based near Kerry in Powys, **Dal Dy Dir** is a small charity set up in 2016, giving opportunities to adults and young people with disabilities to engage with outdoor activities and education. They have 5 paid members of staff and 15 regular care staff that come to help with volunteers (25 young people and 50 people from wider community). They also work in partnership with Harper Adams University that supports the delivery of outdoor education. Since 2017 they are tenants on a five acre field, working in a partnership with a local owner of smallholding. They are also active in the village, setting up garden spaces in car parks. During Covid-19, they enlarged their focus to include also tackling food poverty in their local community. They set up a programme with Tesco and Brakes and other partners to share surplus food, creating a whole social network around it.

### What support did they receive from Resilient Green Spaces?

Support received from Resilient Green Spaces enabled both organizations to amplify the social and cultural benefits of their work. **Growing Spaces** received 60 trees to create a new orchard and assorted equipment, including chainsaw and a set of ladders, which allowed them to better care for their old orchard which was so far neglected. Social Farms and Gardens also put them in touch with someone with experience of renovating old trees.

*“It's a nurturing thing gardening, isn't it, you look after something, and it rewards you as well, by the end product which is the fruit. The aesthetic as well, the blossom in the spring, they look attractive, when they're flowering, and that obviously brings in pollinators. We've got hives here as well, so honey production, that's going to help as well.”* Jim, Growing Spaces

Given their tenancy agreements, **Dal Dy Dir** wasn't successful in the first round of financial support, but was approached by Social Farms and Gardens to reapply a second time. As part of this, SF&G staff member came to the site and gave advice on the plans, whilst meeting and listening to members who regularly shape what the organisation does. As a result, they received 60 trees and equipment, including mulching mats, tree stakes, compost and hand tools. They made links with Welsh suppliers, including Dingle Hall Nursery in Kidwelly and Ian Thurrock. They were also introduced to Keep Wales Tidy support which complimented RGS support by offering further fruit trees and a potting shed.

### **Challenges and lessons learnt**

Because of the nature of their work and limited capacity, neither **Growing Spaces** nor **Dal Dy Dir** staff and members could take part in off-site training or field visits as part of the Productive Community Orchards Network. Instead, they appreciated the flexibility of support offered that meant that in some cases, the training was provided on their sites.

It was -10 degrees when trees were delivered to **Dal Dy Dir** which complicated their planting. Simultaneously, it provided an opportunity to engage informally with local contractors who brought their diggers to help them, increasing community cohesion and mental health as a result.

### **What has been achieved?**

Both organizations have limited core funding, meaning that they wouldn't be able to afford buying trees or other equipment. In both cases the support provided created a new, enhanced green space that contributes to increasing their members' and staff skills and wellbeing. The trees helped **Growing Spaces** to provide meaningful activities for their members with a range of needs, making sure everyone can get involved: from planning the site, planting the trees, making labels, cataloguing them or protecting them and caring for them afterwards. They also appreciated getting heritage varieties as opposed to unknown bare rootstock ones from supermarket, as locally sourced apples make people more enthusiastic.

*"It gives people more experience as well, gives them more skills, boosts their CVs, and a sense of achievement as well, by actually doing the work."* Jim, Growing Spaces

Equipment and advice received will also make the old orchard more productive, resulting in more healthy food shared amongst the members and wider community. The project has links with another community organization which lends them apple press for juicing every autumn.

When **Dal Dy Dir** received support from Resilient Green Spaces, they found out it helped them engage with other local people and organizations who wanted to help informally. For example, a local builders' company gave them extra tree stakes. The support has also increased volunteers' knowledge of orchard and tree management, and of pollination in particular, and also measuring biodiversity. The orchard is also becoming a site for intergenerational learning, where older generations can share skills with younger generations, including tree care as well as cooking and processing the fruit.

Most importantly, it also helped them to increase their local community confidence and mental wellbeing. Receiving this support makes the group more socially resilient, sending a message that they are 'worth it'.

“A lot of the community that I work with, whether it’s my clients with disabilities, or whether it is the contractor, the farmhand, we’re not used to being given things. You know for someone to say, ‘Here you go, have this’. But what do they want you to do for that? They want us to enjoy the fruit. Really? It’s really powerful.” Natalie, Dal Dy Dir.

## Tips for other sites

Jim:

- Planting and taking care of an orchard is a great group activity – get everyone involved, there’s a job for everyone with different abilities.

Natalie

- If you can, find organisations and people who are able to come to your site and advise you on how to choose trees and design your orchard. And when they come, listen to them, even if their advice goes against your original ideas.
- Opportunities create opportunities so make your work flexible so you can follow the advantages and new avenues of work that follow from that.

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.

