



A guide to an outstanding feature and its unique culture and wildlife

Orchards in the Weald of Kent and Sussex

Including poster



Whether an orchard is being managed for commercial or amenity purposes, trees and fruit will need the following:

Pruning – the first step towards rejuvenating old trees. Done in winter, it lets in light and air to stimulate healthy growth. It reduces the weight of overcrowded ‘heads’, thick with branches. Pruning also reduces the number of flower buds, so helping to produce less but ‘cleaner’ fruit.

Feeding – with lime and fertiliser if the orchard is severely deficient in nutrients or too acid and producing a poor crop. However, most traditional orchards with permanent grassland are adequately fertilised by the manure of grazing sheep.

Watering – during the dry summer months; about nine gallons per square yard (34 litres per square metre) on the rooting area every seven to 10 days. Watering the ground rather than the foliage lessens the risk of fungal disease.

Thinning – in the event of a heavy fruit set, helps to avoid too many small fruits. After the natural shedding of fruitlets in early summer (the June drop), thin out malformed and diseased fruit. Any remaining thinning obviously involves removing the worst and leaving the best.

Picking – best done when the fruit separates easily from the spur (connection to twig) when lifted. Not all the fruit should be picked at once; the brightest and ripest first, the rest will ripen on the tree over several weeks.

Storing – apples requires cool, dark, humid and ventilated conditions, like a garden shed, larder or attic. Early July-August apples do not keep and should be eaten from the tree.

Controlling – a great range of pests and diseases can infect fruit trees. However, if you can tolerate imperfect fruit, organically grown fruit is better for you! Generally, by keeping trees well manured and pruned and by burning infested branches, you will reduce the risk of pests and diseases. Birds encouraged to eat insect pests will repay you by eating insect pests.

Further information
Royal Horticultural Society
 Advice on growing fruit
 Tel: 020 7834 4333
 Email: info@rhts.org.uk
 Web: www.rhts.org.uk

Brogdale Horticultural Trust
 Offers training courses on fruit cultivation, fruit identification and tours/events.
 Tel: 01795 53286
 Email: info@brogdale.org.uk
 Web: www.brogdale.org.uk

Henry Doubleday Organic
 Advice on organic fruit growing
 Tel: 024 7630 3517
 Email: enquiries@hroa.org.uk
 Web: www.hroa.org.uk

DEFRA
 Through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, provides financial aid to landowners to either restore old orchards or plant new ones, using traditional varieties.

DEIRA
 Kent & West Sussex; Tel: 018 9392302 (East Sussex)
 Email: stewardship@defra.gov.uk
 Web: www.defra.gov.uk

Keeping orchards healthy

Centuries of tradition



Fruit growing in orchards is entwined with our culture. It was the Romans who brought fruit trees to Britain. Prior to their arrival, the Celts and Norse settlers were sustained by native species like Crab Apple, Gean and Sloe.

The blossoming of fruit cultivation, and with it the development of the ‘Garden of Kent’, began in the Middle Ages. However, it was the Victorians who really encouraged the establishment of new varieties of fruit, listing some 1,500 different apples.

The Weald then boasted thousands of acres of orchards, with tree varieties selected over the centuries to suit the soils and climate. Most farms had an orchard, providing supplies of cider, cooking and eating apples and a range of other fruit.

Fruit and hops were never described as growing in fields, always ‘gardens’ or ‘orchards’. One explanation is that tithes – taxes paid to the church – were claimed on fields but not gardens.

The tradition of fruit growing in the Weald has created a uniquely ‘textured’ countryside. Neat rows and angular patterns of orchards contrast with the smooth sweeps of pastures, shaws (linear strips of woodland) and woods.



Apple bobbing

Apple Day

October 21st (or the Sunday nearest) is Apple Day – a day in honour of traditional orchards, a day of celebration for everyone from growers to schoolchildren, from cider-makers to conservationists. Events encourage the consumption of apples and apple products and give people an opportunity to ‘Wassail’.

Further information
Common Ground Tel: 01747 850820
 Email: info@commonground.org.uk
 Web: www.commonground.org.uk
 or events guides in your local newspapers.



Myths and legends

The rose-tinted image of fruit-laden boughs and confetti-like blossom is rooted in centuries of traditions. Throughout ancient cultures, the apple – be it tree, fruit or blossom – is universally seen as a symbol of fertility, goodness, a protection from evil and a potent symbol of magic.

Orchard ‘wassailing’ is one legacy of the many myths and legends associated with apple trees. Wassailing is a ceremony, often involving song and dance, where people drink to the health of apple trees in the hope that they will bear well. Drums, bells and whistles, and the beating of branches with sticks, are used to wake the sleeping powers of fertility and to ward off evil influences. Cider is poured over the tree roots, or bread, soaked in the ‘wassailing bowl’, placed in the tree branches as an offering back to the tree.

**Stand fast root, bear well top
 Pray the god send us a howling good crop,
 Every twig, apples big
 Every bough, apples now.**

**Hail to thee, old apple tree!
 From every bough
 Give us apples now;
 Hatsful, capsful,
 Bushel, bushel, sacksful,
 And our arms full, too.**

Traditional wassailing song from 19th-century Sussex and Surrey



Wassailing is still an important local tradition in many Weald villages, but no one place performs the ceremony in exactly the same way. The actual date of wassailing festivals varies from region to region – twelfth night, New Year’s Eve or Christmas Eve.

Are you doing your bit?

Fruit is good for us, and not just for our health. We could all do something to help to conserve orchards, keeping and creating them as places for fruit, people and wildlife.

Eat your view!
 Local fruit producers – particularly small, specialist growers – need our support. Buying local fruit and products:

- Helps to safeguard local jobs
- Saves energy by reducing the distance food has to travel
- Assists local and British fruit species to survive
- Sustains a local landscape feature



You can buy local fruit and fruit products, such as juice and ciders, in farmers’ markets, local shops, at the farm/garden gate and on the internet. Such outlets offer some interesting and delicious varieties and often, if locally processed, do not include artificial ingredients. Best of all, you can often taste before you buy!

Many local people are now looking to establish their own orchards, and are seeking traditional varieties of fruit to plant either on their own land, or in a community orchard. Traditional apple trees of the Weald are full standards, grown on non-dwarfing rootstock. They can grow to be large trees, but are usually attractive.

Join a community orchard
 In the past, orchards were the focus of village life, where families and people of all ages would come together for village meetings, festivals and fairs. Orchards are once more becoming a local community focus, a way of bringing together busy people, young and old, newcomers and long-standing residents. The Community Orchard scheme helps to preserve old orchards and to create new ones for the benefit of wildlife and enjoyment of local people. Contact Common Ground for further information.

Care for an old orchard
 An orchard may be large and productive or just a collection of a few trees in a pasture or garden. Sensitive management can balance the aims of fruit growing, amenity, landscape and wildlife. Even if the orchard is not currently producing fruit, careful pruning and remedial treatment can produce a good crop.



Relaxing after the harvest – or a bottle of cider!

Traditional or modern?

Over the last 50 years, the ‘traditional’ orchards, and the fruit varieties and culture associated with them, have been disappearing from the Weald.

Many modern, surviving orchards have a very different character, no longer resembling those of the fictional Larkin family in *The Darling Buds Of May*. Dwarf bushes in bare soil, mechanically sprayed and picked – you can hardly imagine dozing away a summer’s afternoon under such trees!

The characteristics of traditional and modern orchards

Traditional	Modern
Tall, widely-spaced trees – around 50 trees per acre	Densely-planted dwarf shrubs – around 300 per acre
Species-rich grass sward beneath the trees – usually grazed	No undergrazing
Mixed variety of fruit grown – at one time, up to 200 in a single orchard, including apples, plums, cherries and pears	Only a few varieties grown in any one orchard
Up to 6,000 varieties of apple may be grown	Nine varieties dominate commercial orchards
Trees support a multitude of wildlife – mosses, lichens, insects, birds and mammals	Conditions suit far fewer wildlife species
More sympathetically managed	Intensively managed with pesticide and fertiliser
Labour-intensive harvest, keeping rural employment and tradition alive	Machine harvested
Forms an attractive and distinctive landscape feature	Lower landscape value

Orchard loss

Many orchards have been ‘grubbed up’ or removed because there is no longer a demand for the fruit they produce and other land uses have more commercial value. Others have been lost through neglect as disease, death and a lack of re-planting leads to a few shabby trees that are easily lost.



Further information

High Weald AONB Unit,
 Corner Farm,
 East Sussex, TN15 7PR.
 Tel: 01580 879500
 Email: info@highweald.org
 Web: www.highweald.org



Orchards are a feature of the High Weald – a valued Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the rural heart of South East England. The High Weald is a historic countryside of small fields and scattered farmsteads among wooded, rolling hills, sunken hedge-lined lanes and river valleys.



Orchards are indicated on 1:25 000 Ordnance Survey maps by evenly spaced trees on a white background. Explored orchards is a pleasure at all times of year. Many are crossed by public footpaths and bridleways. In some it is possible to wander at will. The High Weald Landscape Trail, 1066 Walk and Tandridge Wells Circular are just three of many promoted routes that pass through local orchards in the Weald.



Exploring orchards

Wildlife havens

Older, and in particular traditional, orchards can shelter all kinds of wildlife. There are a variety of wildlife habitats within an orchard.

Orchard grassland

Regular grazing or hay cutting creates wonderful conditions for flowers such as orchids, Meadowsweet, Knapweed, Dyer’s Greenweed, Hay Rattle and Ragged Robin. On wetter land, sedges and rushes may be found.

Tussocky grass shelters the larvae of butterflies like the Speckled Wood. Longer grass left around the orchard margins favours small mammals, like Field Voles, which are preyed upon by Barn Owls.

Orchard trees

Older trees can be particularly valuable for mosses and lichens, and occasionally Mistletoe. Throughout the year, the trees are a source of food for a variety of creatures.

In spring, blossom provides a source of pollen for bees and moths, which in turn attract a variety of birds. Bullfinches may be unwelcome in commercial orchards, but tolerated in traditional, where they seek out the buds for food.

In summer, the leafy canopy provides nesting sites and food for many birds. Mistle Thrushes are the first to arrive, followed by Chaffinches and Goldfinches as the blossom fades. Green, Great and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers, Treecreepers, Nuthatches and tits nest in hollow trunks, with Little Owls using larger holes.

In autumn, the fallen fruits are a good food source for butterflies like the Red Admiral and Small Tortoiseshell. Windfalls are enjoyed by foraging Badgers, mice, voles and Hedgehogs, and some creatures can become a bit tipsy from feeding on too much fruit! Birds such as Jays, Blackbirds, Redwings and Fieldfares also feed on the fruit, both on the tree and rotting on the ground.

