



Strategic Response to the Climate Emergency

I. The Role of Community Orchards in Addressing the Crisis

We are living in an age of climate crisis, facing a real and unchartered threat to our food security, biodiversity and social cohesion. In this context, the role of community orchards has become more pertinent than ever. Community orchards, especially in urban areas, are a tangible way to help people find positive and practical solutions to the complex problems that lie ahead.

An increased number of better-maintained orchards translates into more accessible fresh fruit and greater local control over food sovereignty, as well as reduced food waste. In addition, orchards create new or restored habitats for biodiversity, increased tree coverage (beneficial for shade, carbon sequestering and floodwater uptake) and public spaces that local people take pride in, unite in and utilise to improve their wellbeing. Our work is proof that orchards bring people together in an age of increasing social isolation and community breakdown. They are enchanting, cherished natural areas that give sustenance to both people and wildlife.

Since our inception, The Orchard Project (TOP) has consistently viewed community orchards as contributing to climate solutions, particularly in urban areas. As the climate crisis worsens, we are striving to apply our expertise more than ever to this end. As the UK's leading charity on community orchards, we see ourselves as guardians of these vital community assets; as climatic uncertainties deepen, we will support communities to best sustain and utilise them in the future.

II. Responding to Climate Crisis: Our Vision

- A well looked after and climate-resilient community orchard within walking distance of every urban community in the UK.
- Well-networked orchard communities that share their learning, support each other, and have an increased ability to respond cohesively to the challenges of climate emergency.

Much of our work at TOP has been committed to averting climate change. We are now stepping up our commitment in response declaration of a Climate Emergency.

III. Existing Climate Action Work at TOP

Our climate action work to date has focused on addressing the following three key issues:

- There has been a significant loss of orchards and associated wildlife over the last decades, with orchards having been cleared to make space for urban development.
- With this, there has been a loss of orchard skills and knowledge, impacting communities' resilience to grow their own local food organically and sustainably and a loss of biodiversity in these orchards.
- The climate crisis is causing extreme weather which is putting orchards under significant pressure. Late frosts (impacting flowering and fruiting), more frequent, wetter and windier conditions, increased waterlogging and flooding, warmer winters causing early flowering, periods of extreme temperatures, droughts, storms (causing damage) and changes in the behaviour and distribution of pests and diseases – all threaten orchards.

In response, we've planted new orchards, and improved the health of trees and their fruit-bearing capacity as a result of better care and management. Through our work, we've:

- Helped stop the decline of orchard habitats and associated wildlife by planting and restoring urban orchards.
- Given urban communities the skills, knowledge and confidence to care for their local orchards by providing outstanding training and support. This enables people to grow fruit locally, organically and sustainably, and helps build resilient food systems.
- Continuing to research and share our findings on the best ways to harvest and retain water in orchard systems, for example <https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk/blog/water-blog-keeping-urban-trees-healthy-dry-spring/>.
- Made orchards resilient to adverse growing conditions due to climate change. We have been climate-proofing orchards through practical orchard design and site management measures, e.g. by having care regimes for unpredictable weather, building healthy soil, capturing rain water, targeted/restorative pruning, introducing shelter planting and hedging plus ground cover to reduce erosion.
- Made orchards more wildlife-friendly (- they are particularly good habitats for bees, butterflies and beetles), e.g. by creating habitats, introducing small ponds, reptile hibernacula, insect hotels and planting nectar-rich flowers.
- Help reduce food waste through our community-powered cider enterprise, making juice and cider from surplus, waste apples.
- Raise people's awareness of the impact of climate change through embedding it in our training workshops and consultancy.

IV. New Projects at TOP

To further develop our organisational response to the crisis, we are currently investigating the feasibility of the following **new projects**:

- Working with local community groups to graft, grow and plant more non-local varieties (chosen from the National Fruit Collection), which may be better suited to the site-specific orchard

environments as climatic conditions change. This will ensure longer-term resilience for those orchards.

- Planting large scale, 'wild' food forests, consisting of edible plant and tree varieties, to increase tree coverage and address food security.
- Experimenting with planting fruit trees from seed i.e. not propagated or grafted, to increase genetic diversity and produce new resilient varieties of fruit trees.
- Supporting our existing community groups to further climate-proof their orchards through planting more resilient varieties of apples, pears, cherries and plums, and species suited to warmer climates (e.g. olives, figs, sweet chestnuts and peaches).
- Developing our five-year model to include training and support for orchard groups in how to embed agroforestry and permaculture techniques into their orchards as a means to increase their resilience to climate extremes and new pests and diseases and teaching group-working skills to help build community resilience. (e.g. shelterbelts, sheet mulching, disease resistant rootstocks etc.).

V. Climate action through orchards: Our approach

- Supports community-led climate action; it offers people practical and tangible action to take in the face of climate change.
- Addresses food sovereignty to improve community food security, diversify the means of sustainable food production, and reduce the carbon footprint of fruit production and distribution.
- Increases the amount of 'nature-friendly' fruit (i.e. organic and free from chemical treatments) being eaten to help support a transition to climate-friendly diets that contain more plants and less meat and dairy.
- Protects and increases wildlife and biodiversity. Orchards are unique and important habitats, providing shelter and food for a wide range of wildlife. They are often made up of a mosaic of elements, including fruit trees both young and old, long grass, scrub, hedgerows, ponds, and standing or fallen dead wood, all of which support diverse wildlife.
- Offers city-wide networking to share ideas and learning, and peer support to strengthen communities as they face the feelings arising from the climate crisis (such as disempowerment, anxiety and helplessness).

Communities will continue to want to plant and restore orchards, and they will need support to ensure these orchards are climate-resilient and robust for generations to come. Orchards empower communities to grow their own local food at a time when global supply chains may become jeopardised. They offer communities a 'hands on', practical means of taking positive, localised climate action at a time when frustration over the inadequacies and tardiness of government response continues to grow.