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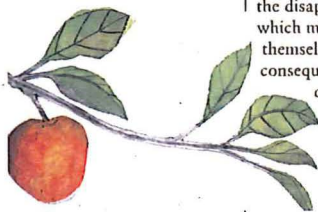
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#### WASSAIL THE ORCHARD

'Wassailing' the trees in the orchard is a community gathering that celebrates the trees and encourages a good crop of apples. The Anglo-Saxon 'was hael' means 'to be healthy'. Traditionally taking place after dark on Old Twelfth Night (January 17), it is now sometimes held near Christmas or New Year.



Daniel Keech explains why community orchards are healthier for us and local wildlife

## COMMUNITY ORCHARDS

Agricultural specialisation and consumer expectations make it commercially unattractive to retain orchards on many farms. This means the disappearance of orchards from counties which might previously have identified themselves as orchard landscapes, and the consequences of loss of seasonal fruit varieties, customs, produce and distinctive wildlife.

Recent surveys in England and Wales by the People's Trust for Endangered Species confirm that most surviving orchards are in bad shape.

Even so, the cultural vibrancy of orchards – especially so-called traditional orchards with tall-stemmed and widely-spaced trees – remains indefatigable. A recent increase in cider drinking has led to the re-planting of commercial orchards in Somerset, Herefordshire and parts of Ireland, while the idea of community orchards has proved to have great traction.

The objective of all community orchards is to protect, plant and renew orchards within a format of community organisation that captures and sustains the many functions and cultural meanings of these evocative places. Some orchards have been in public ownership or use for years. In other cases, parish councils, heritage associations or 'Millennium Greens' have offered devices for community ownership.

In southern Germany, large tracts of fruit trees become de facto community orchards with open access when locals own just a few trees each. In Sheffield, pickers gather surplus garden fruit to make juice, to be shared with the tree owners as a type of tithe. The Urban Orchard Project supports the initiation of community orchards in many cities, including the capital (where other campaigners argue that London's biodiversity and green spaces should qualify it for National Park status). The



Orchards are precious, green spaces for communities with many different social and conservation benefits.

idea is that orchards should be accessible and provide healthy fruit, spaces for leisure and contemplation, convivial work and natural habitats.

The richness of orchards to wildlife is scientifically well documented, thanks to

**'The idea is that orchards should be accessible and provide healthy fruit'**

Natural England, the National Trust and PTES, among others. Communities of tree sparrows, woodpeckers, flycatchers, bats, bugs and lichens are systematically or anecdotally recorded by hundreds of amateurs who are more able to notice visiting and resident creatures, thanks to broader, shared priorities offered through community orcharding.

Some farmers are also blurring boundaries between private ownership and community

involvement. Last weekend, my family and I renewed the autumnal ritual of a pick-your-own picnic in a nearby commercial desert and cider-apple orchard. For three years, the owner has allowed a group of us (we called ourselves a co-op) to rent a few rows of his trees and space in his cold store for a supply of decent varieties, and to have fun picking with our (then) young children. This year, a scrapper and hand press appeared, reminding me that these tools are ubiquitous at the hundreds of Apple Day celebrations on 21 October. We had to queue for the press. I suggested that next year the owner should invest in six more presses. 'Good idea!' he grinned. 🍏

