

Orchard Link News

'Saving orchards in South Devon'



Lifting time at Adam's Apples, 2020!



ORCHARD LINK

Orchard Link is a south Devon organisation set up in 1998 by apple and cider enthusiasts concerned about the disappearance of traditional orchards in the area. Its purpose is to promote the restoration and extension of orchards by offering technical advice and support to both existing owners and individuals or groups planting trees for the first time.

At the moment the committee is meeting every month by Zoom. This arrangement will be reviewed when all coronavirus restrictions are lifted.

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Editors

Copy deadline for the next issue: mid-February.

Gill Gairdner and Sue Hallam



Orchard Link AGM

Following a very well attended AGM in November, we have a refreshed committee, some new officers – see list above – and plenty of ideas for the year to come, coronavirus or no coronavirus. On we go!

(Departing) chairman's bite of the apple



With cooking apples and dessert apples safely stored, cider bubbling away, apple juice pasteurised and labelled, more cider vinegar initiated and bags of apples stored for the pony to last till May, it's a good time to reflect before the cycle of pruning kicks off. Around south Devon there has been a good crop, with some magnificent trees covered in well-coloured apples. Apples on the trees still to ripen and drop join apples on the ground for late wasps, mice, birds, even foxes and badgers. The issue of surplus apples is as relevant as ever. Although there may be as many apples lying on the ground as twenty years ago, there are now many more apples being used than when Orchard Link started up. Members have planted thousands of trees over the years and used many more tons of apples. Interest in the biodiversity of orchards continues to grow, very much supporting the need for orchards of all sizes to contribute to restoring lost habitats. Old and new community groups have been encouraged and supported, bringing Orchard Link into contact with a wider public.

I have very much enjoyed being active with Orchard Link, making lots of friends and participating in interesting and fun events, and I look forward to continuing a lot of this.

Last crunch from this 'chair': best way to maintain old orchards is to plant young trees, and less pruning may well give more apples

Charles Staniland

Milling and pressing

The mill

Apples need to be milled (crushed) into small pieces before they can be pressed to extract juice. How an apple is milled depends very much on how many apples you have. For small amounts of 50 kg or less a simple sharp knife and a cutting board will suffice. Volumes greater than 50 kg will normally require a specific implement, the size of which will depend on the volume to be pressed. Mills can be bought from Vigo or some other supplier or hired from Orchard Link. An alternative will be taking apples to a contract pressing facility, though the cost of transport will have to be a consideration. The final decision will rest on the volume and type of crop. For an orchard with cider apples of one or two species, hiring a mill over a weekend is a good option as the apples are likely to mature together. Larger orchards with a variety of species or dessert orchards require more thought and may involve multiple hirings. Orchards with many species usually mature, and become ready for harvesting, over a period of 6–8 weeks – usually last week in September to mid-November. Dessert apples, even of one species, rarely mature all at once and require hand picking 2–3 times over a 2–3-week period. This is all very weather dependent and some seasons may be shorter or longer.

There are numerous mills on the market but those with larger capacities are usually three-phase, a power source rarely available on domestic premises. Some bigger 240 v (single-phase) mills are available but they can be 16 or 32 amp and you need to ensure the relevant heavy duty cabling is in place to the socket (most domestic appliances run off 13 amps.) Thus, the type of mill utilised will depend on orchard type, species variation, volume to be processed, electrical supply, and willingness to spend money on equipment that is only used for six weeks of the year.

The press

Once the apples have been milled, the mashed apple can be pressed to extract juice. The same criteria that apply to mill selection apply to press selection. For commercial producers, extracting the maximum amount of juice is desirable, so press 'efficiency' (the amount of juice v spent pomace) becomes important. For smaller producers this may not be so imperative. Press efficiency varies from 45–60%, i.e. for every 50 kg pressed expect 22–30 litres of juice. Press efficiency also depends on the type of apple pressed, the particle size

produced from the mill and the pressure exerted. Soft apples and very small particles give less juice. The presses with the highest efficiency are usually the most expensive as they offer the highest throughput and pressure. Orchard Link's large wooden press will give the best efficiency as traditionally screw presses with cheeses offer high pressures. They are also the most manually tiring to operate over long periods and have limited throughput. There are electric presses that work on the same principle but are often three-phase. For higher throughput and less manual input but lower efficiency, a Speidal hydro press can be a useful tool, especially if electrical supply is limited. If you're pressing for apple juice (but not cider), remember to add ascorbic acid to stop the juice going brown, and for cider keep all juice in an airtight container. Air is the enemy of the cider maker, hygiene his friend.

To sum up, mill and press usage will depend on whether you're hiring or buying. If you hire from Orchard Link you're limited to the equipment they offer, most of which is efficient for smaller yields. For larger processing you may need to purchase equipment or contact a contract pressing facility. Purchasing of equipment should only be undertaken after assessing the needs of your orchard and seeking advice. Apples are, generally, low value and high volume, which makes transport costly.

Peter Webb (Milltop Orchard)

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Pressing times: a Vigo perspective

What a strange year Nobody would have predicted the impact of a global pandemic on the humble apple tree. However, we have seen some strange trends this year.

With the closure of pubs and restaurants, many larger cider producers have seen a drop in demand for their products; this in turn has impacted on growers, with fruit either rotting on the ground or the business scrabbling round to find new buyers to maintain their income. Some have seen this year as a write-off, others have taken the opportunity to diversify.

If the pandemic were not devastating enough in itself, larger cider makers such as Heineken (owners of Magners) announced in 2019 that they were planning on reducing their current contracts with apple growers on a mass scale. This has put the future of both real apple cider and orchards across the country at risk. There are reports that cider companies are currently engaging in cutting their contracts with local cider apple growers by 75 per cent, which would result in a decline in orchards at a similar rate.

Other pressures have also contributed to the decline of UK orchards, including exceptional weather events, unfavourable economics as a result of agricultural policy changes and land development leading to their removal.



However, it is now recognised that orchards have very significant ecological importance, with surveys of rare, declining invertebrates and associated habitats such as species-rich grasslands and hedgerows making their value in this respect extremely clear. The traditional orchard is estimated to support some 1,800 species of flora and fauna.

Courtney's of Whimble Orchards

Will drinking more apple juice and cider help to maintain these habitats? Well, only if it's locally produced by sympathetic growers with more traditional orchards – and we are seeing something of this here at Vigo Presses. 2020 has been astonishing for enquiries, with the trend very much about keeping it

local; lifestyle changes around work-life balance; reducing carbon miles and using available resources.

Juicing and cider making has become trendy – inviting friends around to help pick and process your fruit (socially distancing of course) has become a social highlight, sharing the spoils of your efforts reward for the hard work.

Last year we worked with over 55 community groups to help secure funding, create processes and policy and source the right kind of equipment. This year our main clients have been families with fruit trees or small orchards in their gardens. We have seen more groups/friends moving their dream to reality. Larger, higher-yield, effortless equipment has become the norm.

The most popular crushers and presses this year have been the Speidel mills and hydropresses – easy to use, high yield and quick and efficient. A larger investment but allowing the customer to expand into selling juice locally or providing complimentary juice for their guesthouses or B&Bs.

It's clearly good news that more and more people are turning their hand to growing and using their own fruit, spreading the stewardship benefits far beyond those of commercially run orchards.

Paul Courtney (Vigo Presses)



Make the most of your fruit!

- ✂ Press it
- ✂ Steam it
- ✂ Dry it
- ✂ Bottle it
- ✂ Make cider
- ✂ Orchard care

Vigo Presses

www.vigopresses.co.uk Sales: 01404 890093 sales@vigopresses.co.uk

The advertisement features a green manual press with a wooden barrel, a basket of fruit, and a glass of juice. The background is a lush green orchard. Social media icons for Facebook and Twitter are visible in the top right corner.

My hydraulic press ...

I rented an orchard in Staverton and got into apple pressing in 2007. For three seasons I took apples to Grandad Watson's press days [near Dartington]. My first equipment was a bench vice and a section of drain pipe; the juice was excellent but when the pipe exploded under the pressure I found my way to Vigo in Dunkeswell.



Their cast-iron 40-litre Spiedel Hydropress was an extravagant outlay (I see them advertised now at about £450). I found it extremely good but soon changed the direct mains water pressure system by fitting an electric water pump and a 25-gallon water barrel: it's not a lot faster but recycles water.

My elm log and nail scatter was too slow – I needed Vigo's yellow apple crusher [the Spiedel Mill] that takes a bucket of apples as fast as you can throw them in and is really the key to fast processing. A couple of wheelbarrows of apples in five minutes fills the 40-litre press, which takes a further ten minutes to complete its cycle. Most people go away happy within the hour.

So what do you need to clean up? A broom, a pressure washer and a dump truck. The next thing I'd like is a couple of pigs

Mike Alexander

Save our orchards – drink Devon cider

Devon has a proud cider-making heritage and cider orchards were once a common sight, with many farms having their own one. Orchards are recognised culturally and for the wildlife friendly habitats they provide, as highlighted in a recent (13 October) episode of *Countryfile* in south Devon. The autumn is normally the pinnacle of an orchard's year, as the culmination of a year's growth comes to fruition – quite literally.

2020 has been a challenging year though. The spread of the COVID-19 virus has affected most aspects of life. Cider sales fell steeply during lockdown as festivals, events and county shows were removed from the calendar and pubs and restaurants and other venues closed for business.

According to the National Association of Cidermakers (NACM), annual production of cider apples in the UK is normally in the region of 170,000–200,000 tonnes, but demand is likely to be significantly lower in 2020 and into the future.

Many cidermakers still have full vats of unsold cider. This matters to orchards as unsold cider means a drop-off in demand for apples and hence a very real threat to the future viability of orchards and potentially the cultural and wildlife benefits that come with them. For example, Sandford Orchards source all their apples within 30 miles of their Crediton cider works. However, most of their vats are full, so they are only able to press half the apples they pressed last year.

It's a similar story for other cidermakers, including Luscombe Drinks based near Buckfastleigh. Normally they press about 400 tonnes of apples a year to produce their range of ciders and juices but anticipate pressing only about half that amount this year (*Guardian*, 27 September).

Apples from uncontracted orchards are likely to go unpicked and rot on the ground. Some apples are being diverted to biodigesters. Longer term, as Barney Butterfield of Sandford Orchards puts it, 'The chainsaws will come out' (ITV News, 15 October).



It's not all doom and gloom though. The most obvious way to save Devon orchards is to drink Devon cider. Or apple juice Many Devon cidermakers sell in farm shops and other local shops and venues. Or, for keyboard warriors, online outlets like Scratlings Craft Cider Shop or Crafty Nectar. South West of England Cidermakers' Association (SWECA) has a list of cidermakers at

www.sweca.org.uk/members. No one will judge you if you accidentally help a Cornish or a Somerset orchard.

Justin Bartley, Ridge & Furrow Cider

Planting bare-rooted fruit trees

Bare-rooted fruit trees become available from nurseries from late November until the end of March. Below are a few bits of advice to ensure trees are planted correctly and will go on to thrive.

Heeling-in

The practice of heeling-in gives you plenty of flexibility when it comes to planting bare-rooted trees. This simply means covering the roots of your dormant trees, traditionally in a trench outside, covering the roots with soil until the moment you are ready to plant the trees in their final location. If you have just one or two trees you can also heel them in using a large pot and use compost, sand or woodchips to cover the roots. Tree roots must be kept damp and cool to avoid them drying out.

It is better to heel the trees in somewhere and plant out when the soil conditions are good rather than rushing to get the trees in the ground for the sake of it. Ideally you want to be planting on a dry, still day after a period of dry weather, so that the soil is not wet or claggy as you dig.

Choosing your site

No fruit tree will thrive in very wet ground or on a very exposed site. If there are rushes growing in your field, if water pools on the surface or if the surrounding hedges are growing at 45-degree angles due to the constant wind, think again before selecting that location! You may need to improve the drainage, reduce compaction or create a shelter belt.

A pH soil test is also easy to do and will tell you if you need to add lime to increase the pH. Fruit trees require a pH of between 6 and 6.7.

Digging your hole

I have a suspicion that trees are often planted too deep, and this could be one reason they fail to thrive.

Your planting hole wants to be square. If planting into grass, first strip the turf off an area 40 x 40 cm (you can put it upside down in the compost heap and it will rot down). I place a large sheet of polythene next to the hole I am about to dig, putting the spoil on to the sheet as it comes out. It is an efficient and tidy way of putting all the soil back into the hole around the roots.

Dig your square planting hole around 25–30 cm deep. Be careful not to dig too deep – the top-most roots on the tree want to be just a few inches below the surface once all the soil is back in the hole.

Break up the bottom of the hole with a fork to have some loose 'friable' soil and rough up the sides to reduce any smearing effect from the spade. You should also have a pile of soil next to the hole, hopefully broken up to a nice friable consistency.

NB Fruit trees have a graft union at around 20–30 cm from the bottom of the trunk where the tree has been grafted at the nursery. It is critical this is not buried. Locate it on the tree before you plant.

Tom Nancarrow (Adam's Apples)



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‘The Mother Tree’ fruit tree nursery

The Mother Tree (www.themothertree.uk/hello@themothertree) is a small fruit tree nursery based at Schumacher College on the Dartington Hall Estate near Totnes in south Devon. Established in 2018 by Ella Sparks, we have

quickly acquired a reputation for high-quality trees grown using sustainable, organic techniques, with a focus on both heritage and newer varieties suited to the Devon climate.

2020 has been an eventful year for us, with staff changes and a shift to online teaching happening all at once. Colum Pawson, Schumacher College's new head gardener, took over just before lockdown started in March and quickly had to move all horticulture teaching online, while simultaneously maintaining the college's extensive productive gardens with a much reduced workforce. The online courses have been a great success and as the busy summer comes to an end we can start to plan for the future.

Unfortunately Ella Sparks left Schumacher College in early 2020 to pursue exciting horticultural opportunities elsewhere, but in September Richard Lewis took over the management of the nursery and is getting it back on track to continue to supply fantastic fruit trees, starting this winter with a limited range of apples and a handful of other delicious fruits and nuts. Please bear with us while we get the website up and running again and do get in contact with any queries or orders. We look forward to gradually expanding our range in future years.



Richard Lewis has been a gardener for three decades and, with degrees in ecology and botany, he has worked in botanical research and plant conservation, including in partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. Over the past decade he has taken an increasing interest in fruit growing, gaining skills and experience in a range of pruning, grafting and growing techniques. Richard is also a trustee of Community Orchard Week and is a basketmaker and craftsperson, growing a range of basketry materials and dye plants.

Richard Lewis (The Mother Tree)



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Rewilding our orchards

The catastrophic and continuing collapse of our wildlife – addressed in a number of excellent recent books – can only be remedied by a radical ‘rewilding’ of our landscape. Isabella Tree’s inspiring book *Wilding* – a compelling read from start to finish – charts the stunning success of rewilding the Knepp estate in Sussex and shows how even on a former intensive arable farm, nature will recover with astonishing rapidity and diversity when given the right conditions.

For anyone wondering what has happened to – say – the thousands of swallows and house martins that once clamoured around our villages and farms, Benedict MacDonald’s recent *Rebirding* is a must-read. Its message is stark: our wild birds are simply starving because the invertebrates many feed on have been systematically eradicated on an industrial scale; most of our countryside (including, shockingly, our national parks and protected landscapes) are – from many birds’ perspective – green deserts; our nature reserves are too small; the remnant populations of many of the remaining birds are no longer big enough to be viable and are already destined for extinction; and many birds are genetically predetermined to return only to the exact location where they hatched so that when their original habitat is destroyed or no longer suitable they cannot simply relocate to a better alternative. A pair of breeding wrynecks – once commonly found in ancient

orchards but now extinct in Britain – would need to eat a million ant pupae during their summer migratory visit here. Where in our over-tidied landscape do we see hundreds of anthills? *Rebirding* serves as a clarion call to us all: we can – and must – do so much better for wildlife in this country.

What does this mean for small-scale orchards in south Devon? As *Rebirding* points out, ‘there are few more remarkable havens for wildlife left in Britain’. Orchards are a direct link to the ancient wild wood pastures that characterised Britain’s pre-industrial landscapes. These are mostly stable long-term habitats, mostly pesticide-free, mostly owned by people interested in the countryside who do not need to squeeze every drop of productivity from the land. There is plenty of scope for allowing scrubby margins with bramble where butterflies and bees can feed; letting hedges grow up to harbour dormice and thrushes; leaving hollow and dead trees standing or lying fallen to provide nesting cavities for woodpeckers and nuthatches; leaving piles of deadwood on the ground for fungi and amphibians; letting some areas of grassland grow uncut until late summer to give lady’s smock, primrose, knapweed and scabious a chance to flower and set seed. The message: be untidy! As Benedict MacDonald says: ‘Your orchard, growing ever richer over time, is the ageing nature reserve that no one else is growing.’

Robin Toogood

Dead hedges – a solution for orchard waste?

At their most basic, dead hedges are simply windrows of woody material that simultaneously absorb woody ‘waste’ and act as a useful barrier. They have a long history, dating back to woodland clearance and early farming activities of prehistoric times.

But dead hedges have increasingly become part of modern woodland management – not only as a way of disposing neatly of brash and, if necessary, protecting vulnerable areas from trampling but also for their very significant wildlife value. As new material is added and older material decomposes, a dead hedge acts as a shelter and habitat for everything from small birds and mammals to fungi and micro-organisms. At the same time it’s an alternative to burning, so there are also carbon footprint gains.

Harbertonford allotments

From the start these allotments have had a problem with woody waste being dumped haphazardly in odd corners of the site. After seeing a successful dead hedge in a garden nearby and with a workday coming up, we finally took action.

In non-woodland situations like this, dead hedges are generally contained in some way. We were keen to build something relatively enduring so opted to use 1.8-metre 'green treated permaposts' for this; a cursory look online will indicate numerous alternatives. The site was cleared and roughly levelled and half the posts driven in at approximately half/three-quarter-metre intervals, with a second row paralleling these about the same distance away.

We then pushed all the woody waste from around the site between these posts, trampling it down, forming layer 1. From now on, all prunings, hedge trimmings, etc., coming off plots and removed from the boundary will be added directly to the hedge, making new layers. The older layers will rot down, creating greater ecological diversity and leaving room for more material. It remains to be seen whether our dead hedge – about 5 m long – will be adequate or whether we will need to build another.



Consolidating newly added material (photo: Jimmy Swindles)

In an orchard context, dead hedges could be a very useful – and environmentally responsible – way of dealing with the inevitable brash from both winter and summer pruning operations. However, there may be disease implications and it would be useful to have some guidance in this area.

Gill Gairdner (Harbertonford Allotment Society)



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Courses and events

ORCHARD LINK and ORCHARDS LIVE

Due to the coronavirus outbreak and the restrictions that are generally in place around social contact, the normal programme of events and courses has had to be reconsidered. Members will be notified of any developments and websites will be updated with news of what's on offer.

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