



Traditional orchards

Priority habitat

General information

Modern intensive orchards contain small, short-lived trees and are normally sprayed with chemicals to increase production, leaving little opportunity for wildlife. Traditional orchards, however, comprise larger widely spaced, unsprayed trees which can survive at least 80 years, normally more, and the sward below is grazed or occasionally cut. They are recognised as a Habitat of Principal Importance.

Such orchards are found across the UK, but their extent has been in decline for decades. They are rich in biodiversity, supporting a wide range of wildlife. The mosaic of fruit trees, grassland, hedgerows and scrub, fallen and dry, standing deadwood, and other occasional features such as ponds and streams mean that traditional orchards offer a suitable habitat for a vast range of species.

They also have a strong cultural attachment, being places where communities have historically gathered to collect harvests, make cider, and to take part in the traditional wassail to the health of the trees. They are a source of traditional local food and drink.

Habitat threats

Neglect and abandonment – orchards need regular care to maintain their unique habitat. Without pruning, scrub management, occasional mowing of the sward or grazing, the trees can be damaged and the characteristic open-grown mosaic of habitats will be lost as successional species such as bramble take over.

Housing development – traditional orchards are a protected habitat under planning legislation however they are often misidentified and wrongly classified allowing them to be destroyed for development. Even when recognised, they are normally bargained away with off-setting payments or some form of compensation.

Intensification – the intensification of fruit growing into large-scale modern orchards has seen many old orchards replaced with short-lived dwarfing trees, and many more were removed altogether as UK fruit production became centralised into more favourable areas such as Kent.

Market forces – Competition from fruit imports and fluctuating demand for cider and rare cultivars reduces the value and need for traditional orchards. Production has moved abroad where labour and land are significantly cheaper. Communities are no longer reliant on their local orchards for fruit and value them less.

Conservation Actions 'Potential Measures'

Plant community orchards – Finding areas in parks, schools and gardens to plant young fruit trees with a local community group and learning how to manage and maintain the orchard together will increase the inventory of traditional orchards across the country, increasing habitat availability and connectivity. There are grants available for planting new orchards, and you can register your community orchard on the Orchard Network/PTES community orchard map www.ptes.org/community-orchards.

Engage orchard owners in their management, use and upkeep, and educate owners in access to stewardship funding – Traditional orchards need to be managed appropriately. There are resources on orchard management through the Orchard Network and on our own website.

Promote local food networks – Promoting and facilitating local food networks allow communities to connect with their growers and provide a market for traditional orchard produce.



Ecological Provisions

Traditional orchards have a mosaic of habitats with elements of scrub, deadwood, hedgerows, pasture, grassland meadows and woodlands. This combination of diverse vegetation types in a small area supports a wide range of species.

Dry standing deadwood enclosed within trees is one of the UK's most rare habitats, only found in traditional orchards and wood pasture, but forms much earlier in orchards – starting around 40 years of age depending on species and cultivar. This habitat is used by many rare species including specialist saproxylic invertebrates, small mammals, bats and birds, which often use hollow trees for nesting and roosting. Additionally, the maintenance of an open, airy canopy allows light to reach the bark of the trees, fostering lichens and mosses, and the undergrowth below, creating a unique microclimate with a vastly different character to woodland. '

'Windfall' – fallen fruit from orchard trees left on the ground through autumn and winter – provides forage for bats, mammals, insects and over-wintering birds. The soils of traditional orchards have been unploughed and undisturbed for lengthy periods of time so are high in micro-fauna biodiversity and mycorrhizal associations, and provide a highly significant carbon store. The trees themselves sequester a large amount of carbon throughout their lifetimes which, if allowed to rot down naturally, will mostly continue to be held in the soils.

Being dotted across the landscape as they are, even the smallest traditional orchard can provide a 'stepping stone', providing a valuable **habitat refugia**, often in areas that otherwise have low biodiversity and poor habitat connectivity, such as intensively farmed landscapes and urban areas.

