

Glasgow: The Wee Apple

By John Hancox, Project Director,
Glasgow Children's Orchard
(Reforestation Scotland Article)



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So, how many sorts of apples can you name? It's a question I have been asking children in classes across Glasgow for months now. They stick their hands up. "Red apples, sir." "Green Apples." Some of them can name Granny Smith, Mackintosh or even coxes. But Maggie Sinclair, or Katy? I don't think so.

So how many can you name? Well, there are about 200 varieties that grow in Scotland. Some old heritage varieties and some more modern. Some eating apples and some cookers. With great names: Scrog, Bloody Ploughman, Coul Blush, the King of the Pippins, Lord Lambourne, Oslin. All different colours, shapes and tastes.

It's a bit strange writing this feature. As an environmental journalist of long standing I interviewed one of the founders of Reforestation Scotland many years ago as this magazine was being founded. I visited Bernard Planterose in Scourie. around that time and on reflection some of the seeds of this project were planted then. I wrote a piece for one of the dailies – asking why there are no fruit trees in Glasgow parks. I hassled the poor parks people for ages looking for a reply. Eventually – someone – a convenor of the parks department spluttered – that there

are no fruit trees, because people would steal the fruit. It made a good little story and amused people. It still amuses people. What it didn't do was actually get any fruit trees planted.

So how did we get from there, to the Wee Apple project, which I am currently leading, which aims to get children planting fruit trees across Glasgow? This is partly a personal story. I got fed up of journalism. I'd gone into campaigning journalism to change the world. I eventually realised that journalism never really changed anything. It was good fun, and a chance to talk to loads of interesting people. But change things? Not much. Recently when I was planting trees in a Govan School, someone had framed an Andy Worhal quote: "People say that time changes things but actually you have to change them yourself."

So it's a personal story. It's also the story of lots of other people. Much of the credit for what I am doing should be given to John Butterworth, who has done a lot for encouraging people to plant native fruit trees. I met John Butterworth about three years ago at his Apple Day in Culzean Castle, and remembered being completely overwhelmed by the smell of a room full of apples. Credit should go to the people at Common Ground who have done so much to popularise Apple Day. It is the story of teachers, councillors, parks staff, volunteers, parents and others who have helped.

But it is the story first and foremost of hundreds, thousands of children across Glasgow who have been planting their own apple trees. We piloted the project last year planting 100 or so fruit trees in schools, parks and gardens across Glasgow. And on the basis of this we have so far (by Dec 06) planted 150 trees this year. We are hoping that by May – when the trees will blossom – we will have 1000 trees planted. And as most trees are planted by classes, or whole schools – thousands of children will be involved.

There have been some notable high spots. We planted one tree at George Square – just by the left hand lion outside the City Chambers. We are hoping to balance things up – by planting a second by the other lion later this year. We have planted a tree by the newly opened Kelvingrove art gallery. We replanted the Apple Lawn at the Botanic Gardens (which hasn't had an apple tree in years) with an apple tree. I was particularly pleased to plant 4 trees in a residential unit at Yorkhill Hospital for Sick Children. There are countless small stories of people planting at their schools, or in their allotments. Our aim is that people have trees near to where they live. We have also had the odd disappointment. Some trees have been broken and others stolen. One heart shaped planting of apple trees in Queens Park has been wrecked by rabbits. But all you can do is just carry on and replant. (and make rabbit pie).



Another great success has been the apple fairs, and the Apple day events which we held this autumn, when John brought his apple collection to Glasgow. Part of the project is about healthy eating and encouraging young people to know where fruit comes from. We bought an little cider press which is a great toy – and this has crushed countless apples. And the juice produced is absolutely delicious.

However the biggest triumph to my mind is actually about the way in which the project has brought schools and people together.

To explain this – let's go back slightly in time. The Orchard project has grown out of another related project: The Children's Garden, in Glasgow Botanics, which I chair, and which I have driven since its conception in 2003. This is another great project, but our original plan to have this used by local schools just didn't happen. The Children's Garden has worked well as a community garden, with countless children planting fruit, vegetables and herbs. Perhaps this is really another article. But the point is that it proved unexpectedly hard to get schools to use it. Travelling to the garden was a problem, and getting the schools to engage was hard.

As so often is the case – it was a key person that made the difference. This was Gerry Bradshaw, principal teacher at Dowanhill Primary. Gerry is a great teacher, and her class got very involved in the project. They ran an apple fair in schools which earned money which allowed trees to be

planted throughout the Hillhead New Learning Community. The what? Well it was news to me too. Schools are now structured so that the High school and their feeder primaries, nurseries and Special needs facilities are all linked together. This may seem dry detail, but it has been key to the success of the project. Let me explain how.

Gerry put forward the Orchard project in Dowanhill as a Learning community wide enterprise project. It had considerable educational value. It involved the children in running events, and it got trees planted in loads of different places. The local Councillor, Aileen Colleran, was also very supportive. This got picked up by the Hillhead Enterprise Education Officer, Robin McChesney. He in turn has put me in touch with Sandra Prior, Enterprise education officer for Glasgow, and that has effectively opened up loads of Glasgow schools. Schools have their own ways of doing things: The challenge is to understand those. It's about working with the grain of the wood.

Based on the Dowanhill/Hillhead NLC experience, we have developed a Glasgow wide healthy enterprise project, which is running in about ten new learning communities across Glasgow. That was the plan at the start of the school year. I should say at this point how grateful I am to Baillie Margaret McCaffery, who helped to find us some seedcorn funding at a crucial time when another grant had fallen through. Other funding in the form of an Awards for All grant, has now come through.

The programme as it was envisaged, was to start the programme with a healthy eating fundraiser in the autumn, and to use the proceeds to buy fruit trees to plant over the winter, and celebrating the end of the project in May with a Japan style blossom festival. Like the best laid plans, this hasn't quite seemed to work out as planned so far. People have locked onto the idea of free fruit trees. They have got quite involved in training days which John Butterworth and myself ran. And they have planted plenty trees. They have been less inclined to do the fund raising. But it is early days... The timing of the Orchard project works really well in terms of the school year. Unlike the usual school garden, where vegetables, or salad, need watering and harvesting in summer, and there are issues of access and holidays. By contrast fruit trees can be left to get on with it, and in fact probably enjoy the peace and quiet.

And the result? To me the most exciting thing about the project is how it's got schools and their pupils working together. We have Catholic and non-denominational schools working together. We have secondary pupils going to primaries and nurseries to help planting. We have got mainstream schools partnered up with special schools to help with planting. It is this cooperation of people who are uniting (sometimes rather to their own surprise) to really create a Glasgow

Children's Orchard. The project is also attracting considerable interest in schools as it has succeeded in a practical way in getting schools in learning communities to cooperate in a simple but effective way. For some reason it appeals to everyone from pre-school age through to the secondary school age. My guess is it's a primate thing.

As with all projects it is the enthusiasm of people that has made the difference – I certainly haven't done this myself. To quote Margaret Mead : *"Never underestimate the power of a few committed people to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."*

I would like to try to pull together a get-together of all the Scottish community orchards and people interested in growing fruit in Scotland probably around the time of the our May Blossom Festival – if you'd be interested... drop me an email.. I would also be delighted to look at how we can extend the reach of the Children's Orchard to other parts of Scotland. We are also very interested in creating little fruit markets in schools – so if there are any Scottish fruit producers reading this – who could supply fruit to be sold. To contact me, John@weegarden.co.uk or 0778 606 3918.