Sharing the harvest

Collecting neglected fruit, eating and sharing it; that's the essence of the Abundance movement

Standing beneath a heavily laden damson tree on a late summer's day, filling boxes with sweet, ripe fruits and eating a few along the way takes many people right back to their childhood. These days, for most city dwellers, it's an experience that seems out of reach, but a burgeoning urban harvest movement is trying to change this.

Known loosely as Abundance, a network of volunteers works together each year to harvest fruit trees that usually go unpicked and share the produce locally. The original Abundance group was started in 2007 in Sheffield by Stephen Watts, a food grower, artist and forager, and Anne-Marie Culhane, a community and environmental artist. Five years on, like-minded groups have sprung up in other cities. Enthusiastic pickers, who share a desire to do something positive about the kilos of rotting fruit lying around trees and bushes in their neighbourhood, are mustering, identifying trees, collecting unwanted fruit and sharing it with tree owners, local schools, charities and restaurants. ▶

Finding the fruit

You certainly don't have to look too hard to find neglected fruit trees growing amid the average urban sprawl – in parks, gardens and even on wasteland alongside roads and railway tracks (though you may need permission first). In Chiswick, west London, Karen Liebreich and Sarah Cruz started a group six years ago with the idea of working with local schoolchildren, businesses and residents in response to the amount of imported fruit in supermarkets, and the bountiful fruit trees they had spotted in gardens around the local area. They tapped into the Abundance network in 2010.

'Abundance is about getting rid of waste, cutting down on food miles and reconnecting children with food,' explains Karen, who previously campaigned to save the Chiswick House kitchen garden. 'It also helps out people who can't cope with fruit trees in their garden.' The tree owners might be elderly people or professionals with no time for basic maintenance tasks; or the fruit could be languishing on neglected street trees.

Karen and Sarah have been mapping local fruit trees and match harvest times with a network of local schools that get produce in exchange for picking. 'We take small groups of up to 10 children and the first thing we do is pick up any windfalls. The kids quite like the idea that they're not coming to play, but to work. We collect the fruit by shaking the tree over a big tarpaulin and the children sort out the good ones. It's a short burst of practical experience and then it's for the teachers to use that back in the classroom.'

Basic tools are used to gather fruit from the tree

Personalised, localised chutney

Harvested damsons

The Chiswick group works its way around approximately 30 local gardens and calculates that they collect on average between 60-100kg of fruit per tour. The parents and teachers make dishes from it, or Karen and Sarah organise a press to make juice and give the children a taste of freshly picked and squeezed fruit. If there is any surplus, some local restaurants buy the produce and promote the local harvest. Karen and Sarah are also trying to encourage schools to run their own groups, and this summer they took part in the Chelsea Fringe festival, setting up a 'river' of fruit trees along the high street supported by local shops and restaurants.

A box of collected windfalls

What to do if you have a glut of fruit in your own garden

- Contact Abundance and ask whether they would like to help pick and distribute your fruit.
- Contact local schools and charities to see whether they would like your surplus.
- Invite friends for a picking party.
- If you haven't got a local Abundance group, put a box of fruit out on the street and see if local people are interested in sharing.
- Make jams and chutneys – see the West Ealing neighbourhood website for recipes **www.westealingabundancew13.wordpress.com**

Locally sourced and produced jams and chutneys

Local produce on sale at a local market has a strong appeal

Children from local schools are encouraged to take part

Abundance to suit the area

The Abundance ethos is growing organically in different parts of London, often springing up out of existing Transition Town and environmental groups. The core principles of harvesting and redistributing unwanted fruit are shared by all, but different Abundance teams have slightly different priorities and specialities. It's one of the strengths that groups evolve to suit the needs of the local area – some might work with schools, others with refugee groups or children's charities.

In another west London neighbourhood, a group has developed as an offshoot of an active residents association. Member Diane Gill says: 'A lot of west Ealing was built on old orchard ground and it's known as a good place to buy food, so the Abundance group came together by osmosis.'

Blackberries and elderflowers are on the picking map as well as fruit trees, and the West Ealing neighbourhood team is known for its tasty jams, which are sold at local events. Their latest project is working with Ealing Transition to renovate Walmer Gardens Orchard, which is being supported by Ealing council and the London Orchard Project.

Spreading the word

Meanwhile, in Kilburn, north London, Michael Stuart noticed some neglected plum and apple trees one day in 2009, after the council had cut back some overgrown bushes. He put up a few notices in community groups and libraries. Word about the fruit picking spread and captured the imagination of other local residents. Now his group is so established and popular he has to turn tree owners down.

At the height of the harvest season, he is organising about three picks a week, with a network of 140 pickers on his mailing list and 40 garden owners taking part. 'Once you start picking in a street, the word spreads among the neighbours and very quickly you find you are doing one garden after the next. The pickers take as much as they want; distribution is part of the work we do. And we also put a box of fruit on the pavement outside the house.' The Kilburn group shares most of the fruit with local schools and charities.

Fruit-tree maintenance is part of the work undertaken by the groups during winter and many organise pruning, planting and grafting workshops. Other events include apple days in October, and wassailing festivities in January – the traditional time for heralding new-season fruit crops and auguring a plentiful harvest.

There are potentially thousands of tonnes of fruit in London and other UK cities going unpicked. There are also many unusual fruits just languishing because tree owners don't know what to do with them: from loquats to quince, medlars, mulberries, cherries and plums. Whether you want to learn about growing fruit trees, share your knowledge or work with other like-minded people, Abundance is a great place to start, as well as being a fantastic way to see a different side to your community.

How to get involved in Abundance or start a group in your area

- Visit the Abundance network website (ready in September) for more information on established groups: **www.abundancenetwork.org.uk**
- Download the Abundance handbook by clicking the 'Projects' tab at **www.growsheffield.com**
- If you want to set up your own group, connect with an established one to act as your mentor and to share equipment with. Invest in basic tools: a hook and telescopic pole as a starting point.
- Put up notices at local harvest festival days, apple days or food fairs to meet like-minded harvesters.
- Look for local fruit trees and find out who owns them. Ask parents at your children's or grandchildren's schools whether they have fruit trees in their garden that need picking.
- Spread the word. Talk to your neighbours and connect with people on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to let them know what you're up to.

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAUL DEBOIS; WORDS: CAMILLA PHELPS