

Certificate in community orcharding

Sam Valente

Introduction

As a National Trust Ranger, part of our responsibility is to manage the historic orchards within our care as well as establish new orchards as priority habitats within the Surrey Hills landscape. With this aim I looked to advance my knowledge on the subject through formal education for which the Merlin Trust generously funded fifty percent of a part time orcharding course.

As managing Yew tree orchard was the inspiration for undertaking this course, context is needed to demonstrate my key learning points. Yew tree orchard was planted in the 1990s in order to replace the almost completely dead ancient trees dating back from the 19th century farm. These trees were predominantly replaced with around seventy semi vigorous rootstock trees of limited heritage value cultivars, presumably to make the trees as workable as possible while still enabling traditional sheep under-grazing. These, now, fully mature trees have needed significant restoration pruning to return them to condition and the orchard is now due for expansion in the near future. This course has benefited both these projects enormously as I will demonstrate throughout the report.

The course

The CICO course contained over a dozen individual subjects covered over a mixture of independent learning and seven in person days held in a variety of London based productive gardens and orchards. Below I have outlined the most affecting to my ongoing learning and development of orcharding skills.

The subject of orchard history was the first unit and predominantly self-learning led. Studying this has benefited my understanding of why these historic orchards exist within our landscape today as many of the traditional agricultural orchards were grubbed out in the latter half of the 20th century. This means many of the surviving ancient orchards are products of horticultural interest, particularly as status symbols during periods of the 19th century. This topic also led to my further understanding of rootstock and cultivar development throughout history. These two points will come to influence my decision making on cultivar and rootstock choice as well as planting location on orchard projects in the future, for example, my cultivar choices regarding Yew tree orchard on Polesden Lacey will be guided heavier by its history and attachment to the yew tree historic small holding as well as a favouring towards larger rootstocks as would have been exclusive within orchards of that period.

Community groups was a subject of less interest for me initially, being the least directly horticulture related, however throughout my study I came to realise that significant orchards have almost exclusively survived by generating community value and interest in them. For example, attaching events such as wassailing has benefitted the National Trust orchards of Swanbarn farm and Yew tree farm has strong connections with the local Dorking community orchard who help harvest every year as well as run a community apple pressing day within the estate grounds. Pushing these connections was most likely the biggest lesson for me throughout my study, a large proportion of professional horticulture owes thanks to unpaid volunteers.



Damson pick to enhance community value- DCO and contributors to take 300kg home.

The biodiversity subject was an in-person day at the Living under one sun community hub near Tottenham and covered the value that the orchard habitat can bring to the ecology of a landscape as well as the value that nature can then contribute back to the fruit trees. This included elements of the soil food web, pest controlling predators and beneficial plants such as dynamic accumulators. This has led to tangible changes in how the meadow is managed, for example, food plants for the adult forms of insects whose larvae are aphid predators were sown. This also led to many changes in how we came to manage the mulching, in order to better provide for soil invertebrates.

As I have learnt the subject of climate change is now present in almost all modern horticultural study, rightfully so as it is due to have an irrefutable impact on our plant life. Particularly our water demanding fruit trees when they are grafted onto heavily dwarfing rootstocks and left with little to no ground cover vegetation during hot periods. With modified grazing patterns, to graze earlier in spring and later in autumn, the ground cover is maximised. This is as well as favouring the largest rootstocks with the deepest rooting potential for our future planting schemes. Thanks to this course there has also been some consideration over Tender leaf species such as apricots being included in these planting schemes to maximise the climate resilience of the orchard.



Winter pruning in yew tree orchard- Natural mulch mixture used.

Veteran tree management was not a mandatory subject as part of the course however the materials were available online and I felt the need complete this further study due to the apple trees within my care having many veteran features. Covering topics such as sensitive restoration pruning and deadwood retention for wildlife, this subject aligned with the more holistic approach of the whole course, very different to some aspects of traditional horticulture.

Conclusion

To conclude, the impact of this course will be very tangible on the orchards that I come to manage in the future. They will certainly be of higher heritage and horticultural significance as well as more biodiverse and resilient.

This is without mentioning the interest of travelling to London's community gardens to study, especially the emphasis of the course runners on supporting ethnic minority run projects when it came to selecting locations.

Both the intellectual and practical skills I have picked up through this opportunity have already begun to be passed on to my peers within the industry and I now consider myself to be a greater asset to the team as a result. Thank you!

