



# AN URBAN HARVEST

In many parts of Britain, trees produce fruit that is often wasted.

**Matt Biggs** visits a scheme that puts this surplus to better use.

Photography by Tim Sandall

## FROM SURPLUS FRUIT TO FRESH JUICE

Last year, Organiclea's volunteer harvesters (above) collected almost 3 tonnes of fruit. Much of the crop is pulped for processing into juice; a portable press means the juicing can happen anywhere

**IN 2003, A KEEN-EYED MEMBER** of 'Organiclea', a group promoting locally grown organic food in northeast London, noticed that there were lots of apple trees in the area, with fruit that was regularly left unpicked. From this one acute observation, the Organiclea 'Scrumpling Project' was born.

The Borough of Waltham Forest is, paradoxically, a perfect place for anyone with a predilection for apples. Over the centuries they have been planted in parks, as street trees and are particularly prolific in gardens. Locals say that Eden Road E17 was built on an old orchard, and Victorian architect John Warner, who built most of the local houses, put an apple or pear tree in every garden. A red-fruited apple particularly abundant in the area was identified recently by the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale,

Kent as a seedling of *Malus niedzwetzkyana* called 'Wisley Crab'. Locally, perhaps inevitably, it has been given the nickname Walthamstow Pink. 'These trees are found in the most unexpected places,' says Marlene Barratt, one of the project co-ordinators. 'One tree we harvest is in a hospital car park, another is in a pub garden, and there are plenty on waste ground. Our latest project is a "linear orchard", planted three years ago alongside a cycle path, which is now beginning to bear fruit.' Fruit is also gathered from a range of more familiar cultivars, from a gnarled old 'Bramley's Seedling' to popular 'James Grieve'. Most cultivars make good juice.

## Rewards in kind

The scheme works in two ways: those who donate their apples are offered a pruning service, not simply to remove dead wood and misplaced branches but structural pruning, to promote balanced growth and prolong the life of older trees, as well as annual pruning to optimise fruit production, too.

In the first year, advertisements were placed in shops and public noticeboards;

the local newspaper also ran an article, but word of mouth was most effective.

'Some people now borrow picking equipment to harvest from their own trees and may make use of the press, but the majority register their trees and contact us when the apples are ready to pick,' says Marlene. In the first year two volunteers harvested 10 trees, now 10 to 15 'regulars' take the crops of more than 60 trees between mid-August and early November. Last year's total was almost three tonnes of fruit.

Most of the harvest is taken – in environmentally friendly bicycle trailers, another eye-catching advertisement for the project – to the Hornbeam Centre on Hoe Street, Walthamstow, where it is graded for quality. Unblemished fruit is stored for sale; the rest is juiced.

The project has two presses: a portable one used for 'street corner' pressings where the public are invited to take part, and a larger one stationed at Organiclea's Community Plant Nursery. Larger apples are chopped and crushed before pressing. Any rotten parts are removed; the fruit is then pressed until the last drop of juice is expressed – last year the

project squeezed out some 1,000 litres. The 'pomace' (pulp) that remains after pressing is composted.

A quarter of the fruit collected from gardens is offered back to the owner; few take it, but may accept juice instead. Nor is it just apples: cherries, plums, figs and pears are also collected under the scheme and sold as fruit, jams, pickles and juice through the market stall and community café.

There is a voucher scheme for local families in the neighbourhood to buy from the market stall, and fruit and juice also find their way into the local vegetable box scheme. Local people are enthusiastic about the project: it helps them to appreciate the value of locally sourced produce, and reminds people in a 21st-century urban environment of the tradition of processing and storing food for winter – and their ultimate dependence on the land for their survival.

Organiclea wants to develop improved storage so fruit can be kept until the following April. 'This idea is still in its infancy and there is so much more that can be done,' says Marlene. Similar projects called Abundance already exist in



Manchester and Sheffield, and enquiries have come from Woodbridge in Suffolk and from Brighton. There cannot be a parish or borough in Britain that does not have surplus fruit. This innovative idea has massive potential and could be adopted virtually anywhere in the UK. ■

*Matthew Biggs* is a gardener, writer, broadcaster and a regular panellist on BBC Radio 4's *Gardeners' Question Time*

**i Organiclea:** [www.organiclea.org.uk](http://www.organiclea.org.uk); 020 8558 6880.

● **Hornbeam Centre and Café:** 458 Hoe Street, London E17 9AH.

● For similar projects in Sheffield and Manchester, visit: [www.growsheffield.com/pages/groShefAbund.html](http://www.growsheffield.com/pages/groShefAbund.html) and [www.abundancemanchester.wordpress.com](http://www.abundancemanchester.wordpress.com)

**i Too much fruit?** Sharon Hockenull, a Silver-Gilt Flora medal winner at RHS Show Tatton Park, has launched a national database for people to share their surplus fruit. Visit: [www.fruitshare.co.uk](http://www.fruitshare.co.uk)

**TOO GOOD TO THROW AWAY**

The Hornbeam Centre and Café (above), and Organiclea's Saturday market stall in Walthamstow, London, where the fruit and juice is sold