

## Orchard ideas

This is the result of my conversation with Heather Keisler Fornes of the Portland (Oregon) Fruit Tree Project at the Parkrose community orchard in September 2022.

Apples - Although many writers regard apples as the mainstay of community orchards, they are not as resistant to insects and diseases as one might think, so you get a lot of ugly apples. They require pruning twice each year, so they are labor intensive compared to some other fruits. There are some organic sprays that can be used to keep apples healthy, although their effectiveness is limited.

Other common fruits - Pears are similar to apples. They require frequent attention. Stone fruits - peaches, plums, nectarines - seem not to work well in Portland. They are susceptible to insects and disease, and they are fragile when ripe. I'm not sure whether people have the same issues in New England. Cherries are tricky. If not harvested at the right time, they can split and get moldy. Sour cherries, however, are relatively care free, although they need some pruning to maintain the proper structure. Birds really like cherries. Grapes can be good producers, but they need radical pruning each year.

Ripeness - Most people don't know how to tell whether fruits are ripe, so operators of orchards often find fruits with single bites taken out dropped on the ground where they attract rodents and yellow jackets. If an orchard is open to the public, there needs to be a way to notify people when to pick from different trees. There is also no guarantee that people will pick all fruits when they are ripe, so, to avoid waste, there needs to be a back-up group that will harvest fruit left on the tree. This can be a mix of staff and volunteers, and the timing is critical. Some fruits go bad shortly after they have reached peak ripeness.

Volunteers - As I had surmised, there is a need for general labor volunteers mostly to spread mulch, to pull weeds, to harvest, or to clean up fallen fruit. Skilled volunteers (or staff) are needed for pruning. PFTP has had success scheduling training sessions for people who want to know how to prune their own trees. They pay for the training and quite a few trees get pruned as they practice their new skills.

Public access - Many people are afraid to pick fruit unless there is a person of authority present. This is particularly a problem for some African American folks and certainly an issue for homeless people who may be viewed as disreputable. The only folks who typically feel comfortable doing this are relatively well-off white people. PFTP has had some success engaging neighborhood residents from the very beginning of an orchard project so that they feel that the orchard belongs to them and they feel comfortable being there. The underlying issue is the expected use of the orchard. If it is meant to be open to the public then considerable energy needs to go into engaging people. If the idea is to harvest the crops when ripe and donate them to soup kitchens or pantries, then there need to be people prepared to harvest at appropriate times in order to avoid substandard fruit.

Easy fruit - There are some fruits that grow without much attention. Blueberries are an example, although they may need to be netted in order to keep birds out. Other easy ones are paw paw, quince, persimmon, mulberry, and ginkgo. Except for the blueberries, these are not part of most people's cuisine. Heather suggested they might be most successful in neighborhoods with a high number of Asian residents.

Tree size - When they are available, PFTP prefers semi-dwarf trees, because they have better root systems than dwarf trees. Semi dwarf trees will require regular pruning to keep them to a height from which harvesting is manageable. Regardless, dwarf trees in particular and some other trees need to be staked. To stabilize the trees, the stakes should be tall steel fence posts driven into the ground at the time of planting. Unfortunately, PFTP has had a problem with people stealing the stakes.

Nuts - PFTP has had some success with hazel nuts and black walnuts, although squirrels really like the hazel nuts, and processing black walnuts is a messy chore.

Water - PFTP has an automatic watering system at the Parkrose orchard with timers and leaky pipe loops around each tree. They work pretty well, but staff are looking for a lockable controller to avoid people “adjusting” their watering systems.

Gentrification - Community orchards can become attractive neighborhood assets. They may attract home buyers who are relatively well-off. If the objective of the orchard is to provide food for low-income people, this dynamic may complicate the process.

Mobile orchards - The Portland community garden program has had some success with mobile gardens that can be taken to locations where low-income people can harvest from them. PFTP tried planting trees in large plastic containers mounted on pallets. They found that the containers were too heavy to move with the manual pallet jack that was available. Heather thought they might have been able to move them with a fork lift, but that was not an option, so the project was abandoned.

Harvesting - Although some fruits can stay on the tree, bush, or vine for some days after peak ripeness, many need to be picked as soon as they are ready. They also need to be completely harvested at the right time so that you don't end up with overripe fruit going to waste on the trees or falling to the ground where they make a mess and attract pests like rats or yellow jackets. In general, when farmers are running pick-your-own (PYO) operations, staff need to go through an area where people have been picking to collect what they missed. If we have a community orchard, we will need to figure out who will do that.

Expertise – The way most people envision a community orchard, it amounts to a PYO orchard although at a smaller scale than most farmers create. Particularly if the orchard includes a range of different types of fruit, the amount of expertise and experience needed to manage it can be extensive. Even if only apples are grown, for instance, different varieties require different care. For example, the fruit on my favorite Macoun apple trees need to be thinned soon after they start to form. Otherwise, you will get just small fruit. Most other apple varieties don't require this. Heather mentioned hiring a fruit tree pruning service to handle that part of the work. It turns out that there are several such companies in the greater Hartford area. It also might be possible to get some consulting assistance from a person who runs his or her own PYO orchard. There are several such orchards in the Hartford area. Heather seemed quite competent and knowledgeable, but her experience was limited, and she was grateful for assistance she had received from highly experienced people. It was interesting to learn that her employment prior to becoming orchard manager was Roller Derby.

In conclusion – Developing and operating a community orchard is even more complicated and challenging than I had imagined, and the rewards are often fewer than one would like. That said, I believe it would be possible to develop a good one and to keep it going. The thoughts I have recorded here can serve as guides, even though they might make some people run away. As I always say regarding starting a community garden, “Start with people.” That same idea applies to a community orchard. A good, committed group of people working together can overcome serious obstacles.

Jack Hale