

Proposal for raised bed with herbs in the Midsummer Common community orchard

Background

The community orchard of Midsummer Common was established in 2009 after The Wildlife Trust suggested it in their management plan for Midsummer Common. The aim was to enhance an otherwise neglected area of grassland and weeds by providing:

- historical continuity,
- habitat diversity,
- landscape enhancement
- a source of nourishment for those people living in Cambridgeⁱ.

Today there are a wide variety of productive fruit trees of native and local provenance in the orchard, which are aesthetically pleasing and very much enjoyed by the local human population. There are also hedgerows, a compost heap, and an area of wildflowers and shrubs by the Newmarket Road entrance, all of which provide a diversity of habitats for wildlife. There is also a honey bee hive in the orchard, which no doubt contributes to the trees' productivity and has provided educational opportunities for the local population.

However, there are still opportunities for providing more biodiversity, landscape enhancement, nourishment while maintaining historical continuity.

One approach would be to introduce more wildflowers/unmown areas to the orchard. While this would be historically appropriate, there is a significant problem with antisocial behaviour and sharps being discarded in the main part of the orchard, and long grass/ wildflowers may make it difficult to keep these areas clean and safe. Equally, the soil in the orchard is quite rich, and therefore establishing wildflowers would be more complex than in other parts of the common.

Another approach would be to introduce more variety to the orchard in the form of edible herbs and shrubs such as currants. This would provide significant aesthetic and nourishment value for the local human population, as well as valuable forage for pollinators.

Historically speaking, a herb garden in the orchard would echo planting schemes of medieval monastic and Victorian kitchen gardens; places designed to provide nourishment to large numbers of people. A nearby example of a Victorian style kitchen garden can be found at Audley End, which produces a wide variety of fruit, vegetables, and herbs and is managed organically. While this community orchard is a less formal affair than a tradition walled Victorian garden, the introduction of herbs would be of significant value and not incongruousⁱⁱ.

Aims/objectives:

To introduce a herb garden to the orchard, thereby encouraging biodiversity by providing forage for pollinators, enhancing the landscape, and providing nourishment for local people.

Considerations:

The location of the bed should ideally be in full or partial sun to give the herbs the best chance. It also needs not to obstruct foot traffic. A potential site would be at the south eastern corner of the main orchard area, along the fence which borders the allotments.

The current licensing for the FoMC to do work on the orchard does not allow for a herb garden situated here, so this may need to be amended. Alternatively, the bed could be situated further south, near the Newmarket Road entrance; the licensing agreement allows for “planting and maintaining bushes and wildflowers to improve the Newmarket Road entrance to the orchard.” It is unclear that this would allow for the establishment of a herb garden, and it seems that this area is in significant shade due to surrounding buildings.

The orchard is frequented by a lot of dog walkers and obviously it would be preferable (as much as possible) to keep dogs off the herbs. It is also necessary to prevent foot traffic disturbing the plants. Therefore a raised bed would be sensible.

One of the main habitat features of a traditional orchard is undisturbed (ie undug) soil. Historically speaking, when the soil in the orchard has been turned, the area quickly becomes overgrown with opportunistic weeds. A raised bed with mulching should avoid this problem.

The herbs chosen should be native to or at least historically common in the UK. I would propose an initial planting of lavender, rosemary, thyme, sage, chives, dill and chamomile varieties.

While there is access to water in the orchard, it's limited. Many traditional herbs are significantly drought tolerant. However, until established they will require regular watering in the summer months while they get established.

Timeline and plan:

Winter 2020/2021: lightly dig or turn the turf of topsoil in the proposed site of the bed

Winter 2020/2021: Construct raised bed(s) – this should be no wider than 150cm and no longer than 300cm to discourage people from stepping on the bed. Depending on construction material, the bed may require lining. Construction materials and costs discussed later in this document.

Winter, 2020/2021: fill the bed with general soil mix ie John Inness 2 or 3 or a mix of 3 parts organic matter, 2 parts sharp sand, 7 parts topsoil. Mulch surface by early spring at latest to suppress weed growth.

Spring, 2021: establish herb plants from seed or cutting.

Spring, 2021: transplant plants, and potentially fence off bed for first year

Spring/summer year 2: water plants consistently until established – an organic mulch should help with moisture retention.

Materials/costs:

Raised beds can be constructed from railway sleepers, treated wood, bricks, or any material that will retain soil. Ready made kits are also available. However, it may be better (and cheaper) to use recycled materials when possible.

Reclaimed railway sleepers: 2600mm x 250 mm x 150mm (8'6" x 10" x 6") £25 each inc vat from SCL sleepers in St Neots. 6 sleepers to make a 2600 x 1200 bed - £150.

Reclaimed scaffold boards: 2400mm x 38mm x 38mm – available for £9.40 each from Hadley reclaimed, but £80 for delivery. Available for £10 from ebay with free in person collection – we'd need a man with a van or to hire one.

Hugh would presumably be the best person to ask about this as he expressed interest and is a retired builder so presumably knows where to obtain these things!

We will potentially need to treat the wood – barretine clear wood treatment available from screwfix for £19.12

50 pack of 120mm coach screws from screwfix - £9.99

Hopefully some compost may be obtained from the municipal compost heap. This combined with a soil/sand mix or loam (£80 per cu m and £76 per cu m respectively) should be suitable. I'm unsure but I imagine the council might have access to a cheaper supply of soil.

I should be able to propagate rosemary, lavender and thyme from my own plants, and have ordered some inexpensive chamomile and sage seeds in any case. I have plant pots and compost.

Mulching material – woodchip would be attractive and appropriate. If anyone nearby has a woodchipper, we could chip some of the woody waste from the orchard, although this would involve carting around significant amounts of the stuff. I imagine again that the council has access to wood chips. If not, 100L of play safe bark chippings can be obtained from wickes for £9.

So, worst case total:

Sleepers: £150

Screws: £9.99

Treatment: 19.12

Soil: £80

Mulch: £9

Total 188.11

Although I suspect we can do it much more cheaply than this.

Information gathering/initial tasks

- Consider whether licensing for the orchard needs to be amended.

- Ask Hugh about lumber/wood
- Ask council re topsoil/compost

ⁱ <https://www.midsummercommon.org.uk/Orchard/proposal.html> (original proposal document for the orchard)

ⁱⁱ <http://blog.english-heritage.org.uk/organic-kitchen-gardens/> (*How we run a modern kitchen garden in organic style – English Heritage blog*)