

EXCLUSIVE

Edinburgh project to turn neighbourhood into orchard

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PORTOBELLO ART ENTERTAINMENT ENVIRONMENT EDINBURGH

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The Neighbouring Orchard member **Abi** (left) and creator **Annie Lord** (right) (Image: The Neighbouring Orchard)

A project which is transforming public spaces into community orchards is spreading its roots across Edinburgh.

The Neighbouring Orchard is a 'living artwork' which has seen 160 trees planted by people across Edinburgh and East Lothian.

Commissioned by Art Walk projects, it is the creation of artist and writer Annie Lord, who wanted to connect people and help nature flourish by recreating historic market gardening traditions in the Lothians.

"It was about making links between neighbourhoods with fruit trees," the 37-year-old said, "I always think growing and gardening is best done collectively."

"You are working in an ecosystem and it's nice to bring neighbours and friends with you when you do that."



Annie Lord (Image: The Neighbouring Orchard)

The trees that make up this unique orchard are planted not in a single space but across individual gardens and shared spaces that are visible to the public or groups of people.

These small pockets of suburban space vary from tenement greens to community gardens near a GP practice, and reclaimed ground in a public playpark.



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"When we first came up with the idea, it was going to be a more humble thing," Annie said, "But there's been this real appetite for it which has been really exciting."

"To hear how people are getting on and what it means to them I have found really moving. It has this amazing life beyond what I'm doing and that's really special."

The project began in winter 2020, after a year of Covid restrictions and lockdowns.



Tree handout day (Image: Elie J McMaster)

Annie said: "It was originally going to be a free traditional orchard in one place. But then, as the year went on, during the pandemic it made me reconsider how we might be able to do community gardening."

"It felt like a really important thing to do to find different ways to connect to a place. I think people were re-evaluating the space around them and what they could grow in that space."

The small community started with online workshops and talks but has now begun meeting in person, hosting events to share their harvests.

Annie said: "It's a really beautiful thing that a really solid community has grown up around it to share knowledge and have a cup of tea. It's opened up this new community of growers."

It's a mixed group of people, from experienced gardeners to many who have never grown anything before.



Growers from the Neighbouring Orchard in Edinburgh (Image: The Neighbouring Orchard)

"One of the growers grew up in Malaysia and is training her tree in a really interesting way, they way her family does at home with mango and guava trees," said Annie.

"People felt really important to this. It's about who's growing them and what joy you can get from doing that. And having them in your life."

"A tree is never just a tree, it's always a connection to something else. One of our growers is doing it in memory of her mother."

Each of the apple varieties, including Hawthorn, James Grieve and East Lothian Pippin, have links to the local area, having either been cultivated or grown there in the past.

"Apple trees have a really long relationship with people," said Annie, "Each tree has been cultivated by someone so you have this connection to past growers. It's a connection between people and places and time."



The Neighbouring Orchard (Image: The Neighbouring Orchard)

Another invisible network connecting the orchard is the journeys of pollinators who rely on the apple trees for food and in turn are crucial for the trees' existence.

"Apple trees are really beneficial for pollinators because they blossom quite early in the year, it's a really good source of food for bees and insects."

"I have been thinking about the ecosystem of the tree. The closer you look you realise they are not just planted for us, but this range of insect life. Birds as well. It's really good winter food source for them."

"It connects you with this whole world that's going on around you."

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The journey hasn't been all smooth sailing. One tree in Portobello was uprooted and snapped in two by someone walking past.

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But Annie said: "The people looking after this tree replanted it and now it's doing fine, it's leafing and growing. There's this really nice element of resilience and determination to be growing. With gardening, you have got to adapt and respond when things don't quite go your way."

And now, a further 40 trees will be given to growers in Craigminty, Restalrig and Lochend for free, thanks to the support of The Mushroom Trust.

Anyone in the catchment area who is interested in joining the Neighbouring Orchard with their own free fruit tree is asked to email appletrees@artwalkparty.co.uk by January 8, 2024.

Annie has released a book about the project, called **The Neighbouring Orchard**.

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