

Operation Farm

Community Apple Pressing

Toolkit 1 - 2025

OPERATION FARM



Introduction

Picking and pressing apples is a joyful experience. **Abundance Tameside** and **Operation Farm** have been picking, pressing and preserving surplus fruit for over 15 years. This tool kit contains advice, safety information and tips & tricks to help those running their own community fruit pressing events.

Acknowledgements

- Orchardist and cider-maker, Rob Muir
- The Orchard Project (www.theorchardproject.org.uk)
- Leeds Urban Harvest (www.leedsurbanharvest.org.uk)
- Stagecoach and Tavern Days by Alice Morse Earle

Funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Bio

This guide has been written by founder member and Operation Farm food co-ordinator, **Ali Shockledge**. Ali has been picking & pressing apples at community events for 15 years, *"I love the whole buzz of community apple pressing, from the minute we arrive onsite and start to build our stall, to tasting that first bit of juice; it's proper hard graft, but a wholesome & satisfying experience."*

Operation Farm

Operation Farm is a community organisation in Tameside promoting engagement, involvement and enjoyment of food and growing. We improve wellbeing and share skills through community events, learning and activity sessions.

Published May 2025. This toolkit is one of a series of three authored by Operation Farm, others cover Community Growing and Community Kitchens and cooking.

Find out more by visiting www.operationfarm.org.uk



Fruit picking & harvesting

Assessing Risk

Check under trees for sharp objects and dog poo and rake up any twigs, leaves and other fallen debris once your picking is complete.

Recommended equipment

Crates, tarps, telescopic tools, poles with hook on end, rake, hard hat, gloves and buckets. Trugs are good for carrying fruit, but stackable crates are better. Do not over fill as the fruit on top can be damaged by the crate above. Be mindful that crates can be heavy so best to use 2 people to carry them. Consider logistics – transporting the harvest to your event, do you have access to a large car or van? Also, think about how to store apples before they are juiced.

Co-ordination

As with any community food activity there's lots of planning to do before the event. From sourcing trees to volunteer co-ordination, risk assessment to equipment checklist. Having a good plan will help to make the event run smoothly and efficiently.

Sourcing fruit trees to pick

From private gardens to random trees at the side of a busy road, to community orchards, there's without doubt enough trees to pick in your local area. Gather and map available tree locations from March through to May. Over time develop a long list of possible trees to pick; this gives you a backup if tree yields are down in general or the trees are biennial croppers.

Pick pears first then apples. They are easier to spot in blossom than when fruiting, as fruit can be hidden by leaves or camouflaged; consider timing for trees that fruit early and later in the season.

Remember to always check, 'if you have permission to pick this tree?'

What to pick

On the whole, discard windfalls due to dirt and bacteria. Hand pick those easy to reach on low branches and use telescopic apple pickers to reach individual apples higher up. Whilst this is pretty slow, if you have a fair number of helpers and plenty of time it makes for a fun and relaxing experience.

Alternatively, for a big hit, shake apples into a tarpaulin sheet, where a nominated person grips the tree with a hook on a long pole and shakes it from the ground. When shaking trees avoid pulling or pushing branches excessively as this can snap them or damage the forks. Short vigorous movements are far safer. Fruit that doesn't come off easily will not be ready/unripe and should be left. Protective head gear for the 'tree-shaker' is advisable and ask all volunteers to stand back whilst the apples rain down. Whilst a lot of twigs, leaves and bugs fall to the ground too, it is a really quick and effective way to get a lot of apples out of the tree quickly. There's lots of bending over to pick the apples, so this is when it's great to rope in kids! Give them a bucket each and turn it into a game to see who can collect the most apples in a given time.

What types of fruit to pick

- Most apples are great to press – dessert, cookers, even crab apples. You can always blend different fruits to gain a desired flavour. Use small amounts of crab apples, i.e. fruit from ornamental apple trees, as they can be very dry/tannic, meaning they are not particularly good for fresh drinking juice, but they are really good if you're going to ferment the juice into cider.
- Pears, rhubarb make for a delicious, syrupy flavour
- You can also blend with vegetables, such as beetroot, although it can cause a problem with staining. Carrots work well blended with apples.
- Cookers are usually quite sharp/acidic so need to be blended with dessert/sweet apples to balance out the juice.
- The same goes for pears, dessert pears are usually quite sweet, but ornamental ones can be dry/tannic and sharp.

It's always best to pick just before the juicing day to cut down storage time as inevitably some fruit will be damaged and will soon start to rot if left. Any fruit that shows signs of mould should be discarded and any fruit in contact with them should be examined closely for signs of contamination. Try to store fruit in a cool dry place if possible.



General event set up

Set up

There are five main stations on the production line:

- Sorting
- Washing
- Scratching
- Pressing
- Serving

Tip

You need to leave no trace at your community event. Allow a good few hours after the event, for clean down, dismantle and pack up. It's a great idea to ask for help at this stage as those who have volunteered all day may be tired to help with pack-up.



'Rocking up' at a community event requires a lot of planning. A site visit beforehand is well worth it, to help support your risk assessment.

- Have you got access to electric and water?
- Are you undercover?
- Is there protection from the weather?
- Do you need to bring your own gazebos, tables, chairs?

Make sure to give yourself a few hours to set up; this allows for any issues, e.g. faulty kit, electrical problems, access to event. There are always the early-bird visitors, who are interested in what you're doing. Organise each section in a logical flow, to ensure volunteers know where they need to be and avoid them getting in each other's way.

Leeds Urban Harvest, with support from the Orchard Project state:

Getting everything out and in its place before you start avoids bottle necks in the process and ensures the workers have all the things they need straight off, making effective use of people's time.

Equipment

- Event tables, minimum x 2, ideally 3 x 1½ -2 metre
- Tablecloths – wipeable. There are lots online that have an apple print.
- Chopping boards & minimum 2 sharp knives. Chopping the fruit into quarters is helpful if using an electric scrapper if the fruit is very big, i.e. Bramley's, or the fruit is in short supply and poor quality and requires fruit to be cut and damaged parts discarded. The scrapper can take whole apples as long as they're fed in slowly. Ideally designate an adult for knife use; document this in your risk assessment
- Jugs & funnels – all help to get the juice safely into smaller vessels, whether that's bottles or cups for drinking
- Colander for moving apples between trugs when washing, fine mesh sieve for debris removal in water. First and second wash tubs should be emptied and refilled when they get dirty. Initially clean fruit helps prevent this.
- Antibacterial spray, washing up liquid, J cloths, tea towels and kitchen roll – help to keep your event hygienically clean
- Cleaning equipment – apple pressing is a messy job, dustpan & brush, bin bags, scrubbing brushes & sponge scourers
- Waterproof duct tape should be in your kit – it helps stick tablecloths, signage and bin bags down when the wind is against you
- Scrubbing brush used for cleaning the apple eye, the area at the opposite end to stalk and removal of dirt on skin.

Make sure setup is complete well before the event is due to start. This gives you time to prepare for juicing, i.e. have a trug of scrapped apple pulp ready to press when people turn up.

Washing fruit

Washing fruit prior to pressing is absolutely essential to reduce bacteria. Everyone can get involved in this, washing either low down on the floor with stools or on tables for adult-height. This is a perfect activity for kids to get involved in.

Ideally have a couple of volunteers on quality control to check fruit. You need to be super careful and make sure that you don't have any fungus on fruit, though you can cut the bad bit out of the apples, and a little bit of bruising on the fruit is ok.

Equipment

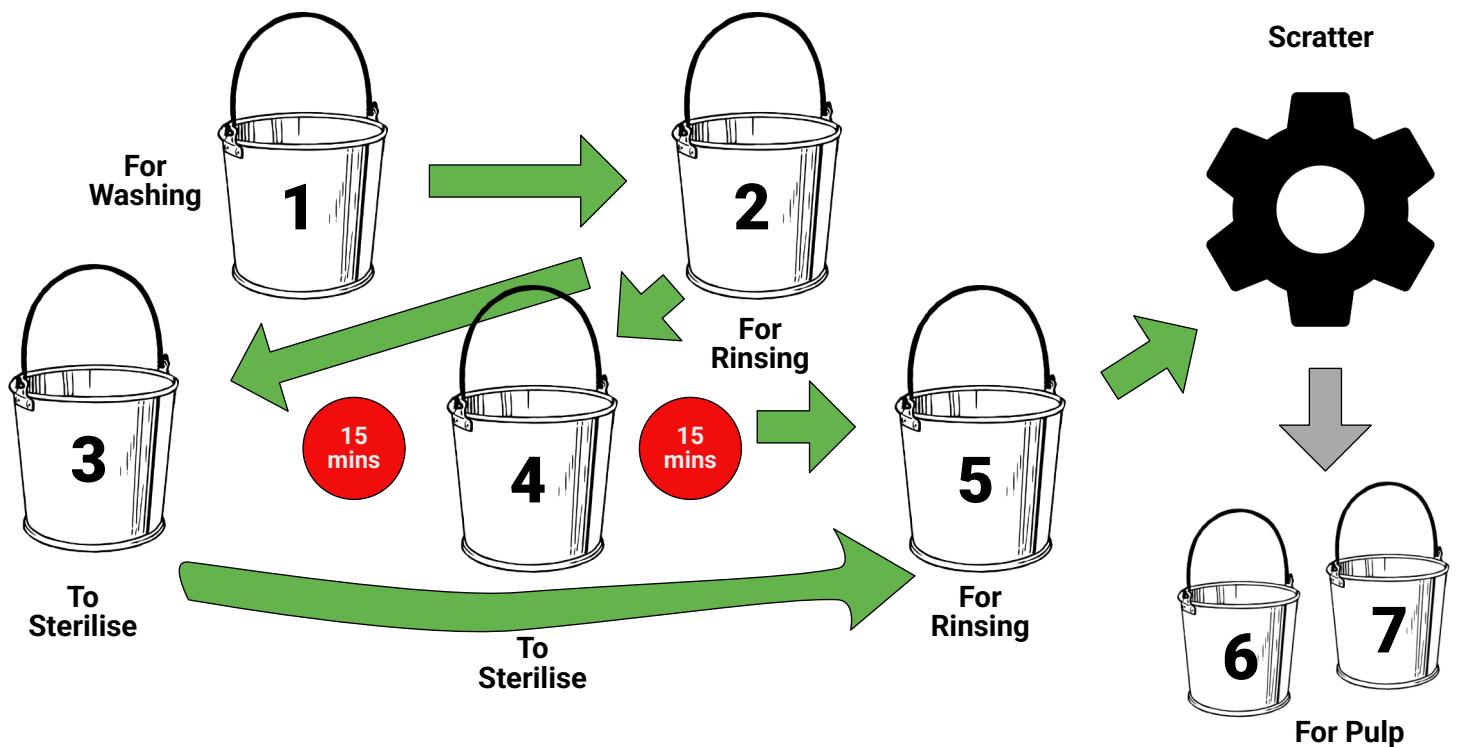
Have you got access to water, via a hose-pipe? Large trugs for washing fruit, minimum 5, preferably 7 (available from your local tool shop), food waste bags.

Assemble various trugs/buckets and fill with water:

- Trug 1 for washing
- Trug 2 for rinsing
- Trugs 3 & 4 to sterilise
- Trug 5 to rinse

After washing and rinsing in trugs 1 & 2, start to fill trug 3, then check the time when full. Do not overfill as fruit will float up and out of the sterilising solution. Swirl fruit around by hand to ensure all are treated. Carry on filling trug 4. After 10-15 minutes empty trug 3 into trug 5 and take to scatter. Drain off excess water prior to loading scatter. Repeat until all apples are washed thoroughly.

Two more trugs are ideal for collecting the pulp from the scatter.



Tip

Use liquid sanitiser to sterilise your fruit. Own brands are half the price of famous brands. Follow instructions on the back for dilution.



Scratters

Crushing fruit into a pulp creates a larger surface area for juice to be released, resulting in a greater amount of juice being extracted. To do this you will need either an electric or manual scratter.

Electric scratter

Electric scratters are easy to operate and with very little effort required you can mash vast amounts of fruit in no time. However, the scratter is potentially the most dangerous piece of kit, therefore place it at the back of your event stall and make a considered decision on naming who can and cannot use it. You obviously need mains power supply and access to a shelter e.g. a gazebo; placing protection over the power source will make it easier and safer should it rain.

Clean the scratter before and after use, especially on the first press of the season; use a sponge and a toothbrush. There's lots of components to the scratter, including a rubber seal, which will need to be cleaned as well. If the apples are big you will need to put them in one at a time, unless you cut them up. Turn the machine off when you are not using it. And make sure you are making regular safety checks at all times.

Do not pour apples into the scratter in large quantities, it's safer to drop them in a few at a time.

Listen to the sound it makes and be aware of sudden changes. For example, if it stops spinning. If the motor stops turning due to a blockage, turn off immediately, do not restart until the chute has been removed, switch off power first, and try to get the blockage cleared. Attempting to restart when blocked can burn the motor out.

Manual scratter

Lower in price a manual scratter is a classic fruit crusher, which sits atop the cross-beam press.





An Electric scratter

👍 Pros

Electric scratters are a time-saving device, crushing fruit into tiny pieces, which increases yields.

👎 Cons

As with any electrics, electric scratters can be very temperamental. You may struggle to get it to work on a generator, so always check before committing. They are also very difficult to clean.



A Manual scratter

👍 Pros

Great for events where you haven't got access to electrics or if the electric one fails.

👎 Cons

They can be difficult to keep in position and to clean. Manual scratters give very poor juice yields and are hard to work. Fruit needs to be chopped up very small.

Presses

👍 Pros

A showpiece at events

👎 Cons

Time consuming to rebuild for each press.

👍 Pros

Small and easy to handle to take to community event. Kids can get safely involved using this press.

👎 Cons

The height is a bit back breaking; consider building a wooden step/base for adult-height and kids to stand on. Some of the cross-beam presses rely on blocks and are restrictive and inefficient.

⚠️ Tip

Food grade contact spray sterilisation needs to be used at the beginning of every pressing session, sprayed on any equipment that's coming into contact with the pulp or juice.

Rack and cloth, large wooden press

Usually hand-crafted, this commercial pressing kit, can prove quite a hit at events.

Manual barrel press

The cross-beam fruit press is durable, reliable, made from cast iron and beechwood, this press feels like it's built to last a lifetime. The cross-beam design applies gentle, but consistent pressure, resulting in maximum juice extraction. Take care to not overfill or under fill the barrel press; 70-80% full is ideal.

Straining bags

Straining bags are part of your essential kit; they gather unwanted debris and residue when pressing. Also good for seeded fruit, such as grapes. Pack a scoop too, helpful to get the pulped fruit into your straining bag. Straining bags can be filled in advance by putting them in a bucket to fill them, then lift out and place in press if you want to speed up the operation.



Above: Rack and cloth, large wooden press; Below: Manual barrel press



Juice collection

! Tips

Fresh apple juice will naturally want to start to ferment; it can even get a bit lively when stored in the fridge. On your event marketing, ask for attendees to bring 'empty, clean bottles' 500ml-1 litre bottles are ideal. Advise people to 'keep fresh juice refrigerated and to drink within 24 hours.'

! Further Reading

Of course, you can always make it into cider as fresh apple juice has all the natural ingredients it needs to ferment. There's lots of books & online guides about cider making; orchardist and cider-maker Rob Muir recommends the book, 'Craft Cider Making by Andrew Lea.'



Ultimately, it's all about the juice! You need a variety of containers to collect juice as it's being pressed, to serve it and to transport it – 5, 10, 25l containers, some with decanter tap and lids that seal well for transport to avoid mishaps! One of the juice containers needs to be the right height to fit under the lip of the press.

Serving juice at events

- If no one is visiting your stall, go to them, entice them with a sample
- Consider using biodegradable paper cups at your event. 4oz/100ml is a good-sized amount for sampling and means you can cater for large numbers.
- Serving jugs, funnels and trays are really helpful for juice distribution

To note:

- Single variety pressing is possible if you can get enough for one press full.
- Fair sharing donated fruit is only accurate if fruit is weighed first.
- It's always good practice to offer large donors' juice back after an event.
- Juice yields can vary from year to year, fruit to fruit

What to do with all that juice

Mulled apple juice is delicious and perfect for winter gatherings. Simply heat fresh, pasteurised or defrosted juice in a large pan with strips of orange, sticks of cinnamon and cloves and allow to infuse. Sweeten with honey to taste.

Alternatively, you can freeze juice in empty cartons, such as milk cartons. Juice can be frozen for months without any loss of flavour.

You can also pasteurise juice in glass bottles, which can then be stored for anything between six months and two years, depending on how it is stored. Careful pasteurisation will kill off any organisms that could cause spoilage of the juice whilst preserving its fresh apple flavour. You can use a purpose made electric pasteuriser or use a pan deep enough to cover your bottles up to the neck of the bottle.

If juice is being stored long-term, consider filtering out some of the sediment prior to treatment. Juice will drop sediment naturally if left to stand in a fridge and then the deposits can be siphoned off. Camden tablets can also be used to kill off some bacteria in fresh juice.

As with all of the above, cleanliness in all the processes is essential to prevent juice spoilage.

Hygiene, Health & safety

Events are a mucky business, both for event holders and attendees. A portable sink keeps water hot for over 4hrs and gives instant access to hand-washing at remote sites.

- Equipment – paper towels, antibacterial hand soap, wet wipes.

Have you got a nominated first aider for minor injuries? This also needs to be identified in your risk assessment. Carry a well-stocked first aid kit too.

Put together a basic tool kit; fuses might blow, adjustments need to be made – screwdrivers, spare screws for the press, etc..

Other handy stuff

⚠ Links & books

- The Orchard Project (www.theorchardproject.org.uk)
- Vigo online (www.vigoltd.com)
- *Craft Cider Making* by Andrew Lea

By-product

There's always a large amount of pomace left after pressing, this can be composted or used for animal feed. Pigs and chickens love it!

Pomace can be rehydrated, repressed and fermented to make a very low alcohol cider, called water-cider or ciderkin. Back in the day, this was given to farm workers, like a small ale, which at the time was safer than drinking water! According to Alice Morse Earle,

Water-cider, or ciderkin, was a very weak, slightly cidery beverage, which was made by pouring water over the solid dregs left after the cider had been pressed from the pomace, and pressing it.. sometimes a little molasses and ginger was added.

Pomace bags need to be put in crates when filling and moving to stop them splitting.

Volunteers

Volunteers are just as important as apples to any pressing event. Advertise for help, allocate clear tasks and co-ordinate an army of volunteers to help run your event. Ensure good levels of welfare, look after them with plenty of cake, regular breaks and lots of juice!

Publicity

Advertising a community event is crucial to ensure plenty of folk turn up! Publicity provides vital information about the event, builds excitement and anticipation, and ultimately contributes to a successful gathering. Various marketing methods can be used to advertise your community event:

- Use engaging content on social media, with lots of pictures, videos and relevant hashtags. Create an event post on socials such as Facebook and build momentum with regular posts.
- Establish a mailing list and send regular event updates
- Collaborate with local community organisations or groups to promote the event through their networks. Is your apple pressing activity part of a larger community event? Make sure your activity information is part of their event marketing
- Design, publish, print and distribute flyers and posters and display in community settings
- Reach out to local newspapers, radio stations, or community newsletters for potential coverage or advertising opportunities

Fun, fruit activities to compliment your community event

- The Orchard Project have put together this wonderful guide: www.theorchardproject.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Helping-Britain-Blossom-GUIDE-to-APPLE-DAY-2017.pdf to help you celebrate Apple Day
- Human fruit machine
- Food & drink tasters – fruit smoothies, dried fruit, fruit pies, jams & chutneys, fruit leather
- Fruit bingo
- Fruit painting & stamping
- Longest apple peel competition
- Apple bobbing
- Orchard specialist – fruit ID, grafting and pruning advice
- Singing, dancing and storytelling





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Produced by **Operation Farm**
with funding from **The National Lottery Community Fund**.
Printed on recycled paper.