Orchard and Forest Garden Guidance and Assessment Criteria

Orchard and Forest Garden Planting and Aftercare Guidance
Good site selection, suitable tree varieties, careful planting, appropriate spacing and regular aftercare are essential if an orchard is to establish successfully and thrive for the long term.

Right tree. Right place. Plant it well. Protect it. Prune and care for it. And, in dry conditions, water it.

The success of the scheme will not simply be measured by how many trees are planted, but by whether they survive, establish and develop into healthy, productive orchards that provide fruit, blossom, wildlife habitat and lasting benefits for people, nature and communities for many years to come.

1. key information
Eligible area: All planting must take place within the Shropshire Council and/or Telford & Wrekin Council administrative areas.
How many can I request? You must request at least 5 trees for your orchard or forest garden. There is no upper limit, but requests must be realistic. You will need to demonstrate that you have sufficient suitable space and the capacity to plant and care for the trees.
Planting deadline: All trees must be planted by 21 February 2027. By this date, you must also send photographs of the completed planting and a site plan to tree.scheme@shropshire.gov.uk.
Tree collection: Trees will be sizeable so applicants will need access to a trailer or van to collect the trees. The collection points are:

- Prees Heath Forest Nursery, Mill Lane, Higher Heath, SY13 2LR
- John Holliday, Lower Hayton, Ludlow, SY8 2AY
- Small Woods, Station Rd, Coalbrookdale, Telford TF8 7DR

Monitoring: A random selection of sites will receive a compliance visit to confirm that planting has been completed as agreed.
Please note: This is a competitive scheme, and an application does not guarantee an allocation. Please give your answers careful consideration and clearly explain what you intend to plant, why it is appropriate for your site, and how you will ensure successful establishment.
Forest gardens: Only the orchard trees will be provided. Expert advice is available for any successful applicants who would like to create a forest garden.
Application submission deadline: Applications must be submitted by **6th** December 2026.

2. Start with the right place
Before deciding what to plant, think carefully about the site. Successful establishment depends on factors including soil, climate, competing vegetation, drainage, pests and the suitability of the planting stock. The principle should be the right trees, in the right place, for the right reasons.

Plan for the tree you want in 20 years, not the tree you receive on planting day. Successful orchards and forest gardens start with appropriate sites and thoughtful designs, but their long-term value depends on good establishment and continuing management. Applicants should therefore consider from the outset who will water, maintain and monitor the planting and how it will develop as the trees mature.

Consider:

- **Existing habitat.** Avoid planting trees on valuable habitats that would be damaged by planting. Existing species-rich grassland, wetlands, heathland and other important open habitats should be identified before proposals are developed.
- **Space.** Think about the eventual size and spread of the trees, not just their size when planted. Make sure to match the type of rootstock to the space available and ultimate size of the tree.
- **Light.** Most fruit trees will benefit from a reasonably open, sunny location.
- **Soil and drainage.** Consider whether conditions are suitable for the varieties and rootstocks proposed. Dwarf rootstocks will not be funded.
- **Water.** Think about how newly planted trees will be watered, particularly during prolonged dry periods. Irrigation and the timing of planting are important considerations for tree establishment.
- **Infrastructure.** Allow sufficient space from buildings, roads, paths, utilities, drainage systems and boundaries.
- **Access.** Make sure there will be practical access for planting, watering, pruning, mowing or grazing and eventually harvesting fruit.
- **Historic environment and archaeology.** Consider whether ground disturbance or tree roots could affect known archaeological or historic features.

3. Think of an orchard as a habitat, not simply a collection of fruit trees

A well-designed orchard can provide much more than fruit. Traditional orchards can contain a mosaic of habitats including trees of different ages, grassland, deadwood, ponds and nectar sources. Traditional orchards are recognised as priority habitat. This is obviously created over time but is worth thinking about from the outset.
Where appropriate, aim to create diversity through:

- a mixture of fruit and/or nut species and varieties;
- trees that flower and fruit at different times;
- structural variety;
- grassland or other suitable vegetation beneath and between trees;
- flowering plants and other sources of nectar and pollen;
- hedges and other habitats around the orchard;
- retention of existing mature or veteran trees and deadwood where it is safe to do so.

4. Choose trees carefully

Consider the purpose of the orchard before selecting trees.
Think about:

- fruit or nut species;
- varieties suited to the location;

- local or heritage varieties where appropriate;
- eventual tree size;
- rootstock;
- pollination compatibility;
- disease resistance;
- the desired lifespan and character of the orchard;
- how the fruit will eventually be harvested and used.

For a wildlife-rich traditional orchard, larger, longer-lived fruit trees on more vigorous rootstocks can be particularly valuable, although larger and potentially more difficult to harvest. It can also be valuable to establish different generations of trees rather than having an orchard in which every tree is exactly the same age.

5. Design before you plant

Prepare a simple planting plan showing where trees will go and their approximate spacing. Allow enough room for each tree to reach its expected mature size. Very close planting may look attractive initially but can create competition and management problems as the trees mature.

The design should also consider:

- access routes;
- mowing or grazing;
- future harvesting;
- water supply;
- existing trees, hedges and habitats;
- public access;
- neighbouring land and buildings;
- opportunities to connect with existing habitats.

Where appropriate, orchards can be particularly valuable where they extend or connect existing tree and woodland habitats.

6. Give new trees the best chance of establishing

The first few years are particularly important.

New trees need appropriate planting, protection and aftercare. Routine checks of tree condition, guards, stakes and ties, competition from grass and weeds, mulch and watering as important elements of young-tree aftercare.

In particular:

Watering

Have a realistic plan for watering from the outset. Do not assume that natural rainfall will always be enough, particularly during dry springs and summers. Watering requirements will vary according to weather, soil and site conditions.

Competition

Control excessive grass and weed competition immediately around young trees while taking care not to damage valuable orchard-floor vegetation.

Mulching

Appropriate mulching can help suppress competing vegetation and protect soil moisture.

Soil Enhancement
If you intend to plant on soil of poor structure, or low nutrient or organic matter content, then incorporating a soil enhancer such as biochar and / or a slow-release fertiliser into the backfill, may enhance establishment and growth of the planted trees. Seek further guidance and follow manufacturer's instructions, depending on the soil and species choice at your site.

Protection
Where necessary, protect trees against livestock, rabbits, deer, accidental damage or other locally relevant pressures.

Stakes, ties and guards
Check these regularly. They should continue to perform their intended function without rubbing, constricting or damaging the tree.

7. Plan for management before planting

An orchard is a long-term commitment. Applicants should know who will look after it once the initial enthusiasm of planting day has passed.
A simple management plan should identify responsibility for:

- watering;
- checking tree health;
- replacing losses where appropriate;
- formative pruning;
- checking guards, stakes and ties;
- managing vegetation around trees;
- looking for pests and diseases;
- maintaining access;
- managing the orchard floor;
- harvesting and using the fruit.

A named person or group with responsibility for coordinating ongoing care will need to be identified for the orchard.

8. Forest gardens

Forest gardens share many of the same principles as orchards but have a different structure. Rather than creating an open orchard dominated by fruit trees and grassland, a forest garden deliberately combines different layers of mainly perennial productive plants, seeking to emulate aspects of a woodland ecosystem. A forest garden includes a taller tree canopy, smaller trees, shrubs, herbaceous plants, ground cover, roots and rhizosphere plants, and climbers.
For example, a forest garden might incorporate:

- **canopy:** larger fruit or nut trees
- **lower tree layer:** smaller fruit trees or hazel
- **shrubs:** currants, gooseberries or raspberries
- **herbaceous layer:** perennial herbs and vegetables
- **ground cover:** low-growing productive plants
- **climbers:** productive climbing species
- **root layer:** suitable perennial root crops

The precise planting should respond to the site rather than trying to include every possible layer.

Designing a forest garden

Because planting is more structurally complex than a conventional orchard, forest garden design should consider how the whole site functions as a system, including how light, water and wind move through it and how these will change as trees and shrubs mature.

Applicants should particularly consider:

- the ultimate height and spread of each plant
- how much light will reach the different planting layers as trees mature
- how water moves through the site and opportunities to slow, capture and make better use of rainfall, including rainwater collected from roofs, sheds or other structures where appropriate
- opportunities to use trees, shrubs and hedges as shelter or windbreaks, while avoiding excessive shading or competition
- competition between plants for water, light and nutrients
- incorporating soil-building plants, including nitrogen-fixing species, that can help support the fertility and resilience of the wider planting
- providing a range of flowering plants to support pollinators and other beneficial insects, including those that can contribute to natural pest control
- opportunities to incorporate ponds or other small wetland features, where suitable, to increase habitat diversity and support wildlife
- access for harvesting and maintenance
- avoiding plants that may become excessively dominant
- how the different layers will be managed over time
- existing habitats and vegetation
- how the design will respond to changing conditions as the forest garden develops and matures

The aim is to create a productive, diverse and resilient system in which the different elements support one another. Forest gardens can produce fruit, nuts, herbs and other useful crops while improving soil health, providing habitat for wildlife, supporting pollinators and making better use of water and other natural resources.

Successful applicants will have access to a forest garden specialist who will provide advice to help develop a design that is appropriate to the individual site and support its successful establishment.

9. Don't over-tidy the orchard

Resist the temptation to manage the whole site like an amenity lawn. Depending on the site, consider allowing different vegetation heights, flowering plants and other habitat features to develop between and around the trees.

Existing veteran fruit trees can be especially valuable. Standing, attached and fallen deadwood also contributes to the biodiversity value of established traditional orchards and features explicitly in current government orchard management guidance. The objective is a living mosaic of fruit trees and other habitats, while retaining the access needed to manage and enjoy the orchard.

Orchard and Forest Garden Scheme Assessment Criteria

Stage 1: Essential criteria
Applications should only progress if **all** the following are met:

- **Landowner permission:** The applicant owns the land or has permission from the landowner to undertake the proposed planting.
- **Deliverability:** The applicant is certain that the planting can take place and photos submitted to tree.scheme@shropshire.gov.uk by 21st February 2027.
- **Suitable location:** The proposed orchard or forest garden is appropriate for the site and follows the right tree, right place principle. Where planting is proposed on or close to a designated or sensitive site, further checks may be required.
- **No harm to important habitats:** Planting will not damage or replace an existing priority or wildlife-rich habitat, such as species-rich grassland, heathland or wetland.
- **Historic environment:** There are no known historic environment or archaeological constraints that would make the proposed planting inappropriate, and any necessary checks have been undertaken.
- **Space for planting to mature:** There is sufficient space for the proposed trees and other planting to develop without foreseeable conflict with buildings, roads, paths, utilities or other infrastructure. For forest gardens, consideration should also have been given to the eventual height, spread and interaction of the different planting layers.
- **Long-term purpose:** There is a clear rationale for creating the orchard or forest garden and reasonable consideration has been given to its future use and management.
- **Commitment to aftercare:** Someone (individually or collectively as a group) has been clearly identified as responsible for establishment and ongoing management for a minimum of ten years. They have demonstrated a clear understanding of the level of commitment and the work that is involved.
- **Sharing information:** Acceptance that location and non-personal project details will be recorded and may be shown on a publicly accessible map.

Stage 2: Assessment criteria
Applications will be prioritised against the following criteria:

Criterion	What we are looking for	Score
Suitability of planting site	Appropriate planting is being proposed. Including site conditions, space, species choice, location, existing habitats.	0-3
Contribution to Local Nature Recovery Strategy	The planting will connect, extend or provide a stepping stone between existing orchards, hedgerows, trees, woodland or other habitats, particularly where this supports LNRS priorities.	0–3
Long-term management	There is a convincing and practical commitment to establishment, watering, monitoring, pruning and longer-term management, with clear responsibility for looking after the site.	0–3

Community benefit	The project will provide wider benefits, such as community access, education, volunteering, learning, food growing, sharing of produce or opportunities for people to engage with nature.	0–3