



Action sheet

How to organise local food events

Local food - making a community

This sheet is about events that help people connect with each other and with their place through local food - events which encourage people to interact and make exchanges with their neighbours and their neighbourhoods.

Often we do not know the people who live nearby, and we have made only a superficial viewing of our local area. If we appreciate what is peculiar and distinctive about our place and know all kinds of people who live near us well enough to trust them, we belong to our home place, we feel safer and we take better care of what is precious and individual in our community.

Local communities do not just happen. Nor is culture about re-enacting frozen traditions. Community and culture are created by participation and exchange.

Participation in growing, eating and cooking local food is a rich way to bring us together in the place that we live.

The events

The events below are simple to organise, requiring no special skill and little money. They all involve people interacting with each other and with food or farming in its particular local setting. They could be run on a farm, at a farmers' market, by a Community Supported Agriculture scheme, by a scout group, Young Farmers or WI group, by an individual activist, local Friends of the Earth group, allotment

association, summer fête, or for a children's birthday party for example.

Plant and cake swap

People come and bring cakes, seeds or plants, which they leave on a table, and exchange for something they find there. Offerings are preferably home grown or home made. Everyone can be offered a seat and a cup of tea so there is time for chat. The event is usually held in someone's house or a local hall and could be attended by plot holders on an allotment site or a local organic group. In some places, this has become an annual spring event.

Scarecrows

In some places, scarecrow making has become an annual public event with some fairly outlandish contributions (such as Mr Blobby), which probably would scare the crows off, even if they attract the visitors. With the farmers' permission, scarecrows offer a point of interest even to an open arable field.

Calf naming

Local people are invited to the farm to meet a new calf. The farmer might explain the pedigree of the animal and something about how it will be raised. Everyone can suggest a name and one is selected. The person who proposed the name may be entitled to the first milk from the calf, or similar. Good for farm shops or school visits.

Wild food walks

There are many variations on this theme. Wild food walks help people look at the detail in the hedgerow. A wild food walk might entail a

blackberrying outing followed by jam making together at somebody's house. There may be a fine crab apple or sloe patch in the parish and an annual collecting day (ask permission!), which could be preceded by a blossom walk earlier in the season and followed by a jam competition at the village fête or a Christmas sloe gin party. If you have a good path then a pram parade to a community orchard or neglected fruit tree could make an outing for a toddlers' group. Edible seaweed trips to the beach are another possibility.

A book called *Wild Food* (see below) is an excellent guide, with recipes for all kinds of plants. Be sure of correct identification and do not over pick scarce plants.

Wild food water trips with a fishing theme might be arranged for an open day at the fishing club, or with fishermen offering sea trips, such as occur during the annual fish festival in Pembrokeshire.

Night-time walks

A night-time walk can help open your eyes and ears anew to a familiar place. Walkers can bring a candle lantern, using a jam jar. The walk could finish with a shared soup made with food from the landscape the walk passed through. Good for Christmas Eve, Halloween, Winter Solstice, etc. Be careful of twisted ankles of course - find a flat path.

Field names

Field names are often intriguing or illuminating. Farmers and landowners often know field names and they can be found in title deeds, on the tithe maps of the 1840s held in County Records Offices or on individual farm maps. The names can be kept in circulation, perhaps by making a sign with the field name where a footpath crosses a field. Where a field has only a number, people who live near the field could create a name. For more on field names and field days, contact Common Ground (see below). Similarly, people may like to learn the names of rivers and brooks that pass through farmland. In some places local artists have made signs for river names.

Art exhibitions

Art can help people appreciate a place from a different perspective. Students from a local college could be invited to undertake their photography project on an urban allotment site. Artists are often pleased for an opportunity to show their work in a farm shop, café, etc and may have paintings or poems relating to the land or agriculture. The library may be able to tell you about local art or craft societies or classes, so that you can invite wood turners to use your apple prunings, potters to use your river silt, or weavers to use your wool.

Local food picnics and roving meals

For summer, you could have a 'bring and share' picnic with dishes containing at least one item of local food. In winter a roving meal using local ingredients is a friendly occasion, good for cycling, riding, or rambling clubs. A different course is served at each person's house. The Soil Association's website lists where to buy organic food locally, including farm shops, (www.whyorganic.org) and the National Association of Farmers' Markets website lists UK farmers' markets (www.farmersmarkets.net). Many places now have their own local food directory listing where to buy local food, and the local authority may know whether there is one for the area. *Traditional Foods of Britain* (see below) is an inventory of local dishes. Of appeal to those who like the exotic are flowery dinner parties, where locally picked flowers can replace the mange tout from Kenya. Several flowers are edible, including elderflowers and alexanders as fritters, chamomile as tea, broom buds in salad and clover as wine (see *Wild Food* below).

Giant pies

Several communities have celebrated an event by jointly producing and eating a giant pie or cake, perhaps to a local recipe. There may even be a chance to have an entry in the Guinness Book of Records.

Food paths and pictures

In some places, people have made large displays by arranging food on the ground in the shape of a snake, flowers, etc. This can be turned into a public picnic. Food can also be arranged to

form a pathway, for example by placing rows of apples in the grass through a cider orchard, to lead to the drinking room.

Apple Day and variations

Common Ground (see details below) has promoted Apple Day to celebrate orchards and varieties of apples. Every year in the autumn people hold events with apple bobbing, tasting, identification, juice pressing, cider drinking and so on. Common Ground also promotes Tree Dressing on the first weekend in December.

Equally, plums, pears and cherries deserve a day of their own. A rhubarb festival is held in Wakefield, a garlic festival happens on the Isle of Wight, and a whitebait festival has been held in Southend with a blessing of the sea. Potatoes lend themselves to celebration of variety. Pumpkin Days, perhaps around Halloween, can bring out the monster, weird and wonderful squashes of the season, pumpkin carvings and lanterns, and seed trading.

Children's vegetable activities

Good for fêtes, or introducing new dietary habits to sceptical young people, are potato printing and vegetables necklaces (try radish jewels, swede beads and carrot slices). Ugly 'people' can be made with vegetables and matchsticks and hidden around the garden to scare the slugs away. Thin vegetable leaves can go into a flower press.

Easter eggs

Guaranteed to get children investigating every tree hollow and bramble bush is the annual Easter egg hunt, with eggs (chocolate or otherwise) concealed in grass nests.

Egg racing, using long sticks down a sloping field is perhaps best if the eggs are hard-boiled first. Variations are pancake races and egg-and-spoon races.

Egg lobbing is a team game, in pairs - more entertaining if the eggs are not hard-boiled. The winning pair is the one which throws and catches an egg over the longest distance.

Egg painting is more dainty, and if you know someone with happy free-range chickens, it's nice to collect the eggs yourselves. To empty them, make a 1mm hole in the top and bottom, using a pin, and blow hard over a bowl. If your paint is waterproof, everyone can hang their egg in a particular tree. If you tie a string to a matchstick, it can be posted through the hole in the egg and will wedge sideways, so the egg will hang.

Snail racing

Before the race, entrants select a snail and write their initials on the shell with a waterproof marker. Initialled snails are put in a bucket, ready for the race. When everyone has a snail, the race begins. The race track is a board, not too rough and free from salt. It has two concentric circles marked on it, the outer one about three feet from the inner one. Racers begin inside the inner circle and the winner is the first to cross the outer line. You may find one or two people willing to try out a French recipe on the losers – see *River Cottage Cook Book* below.

Racing floating fruits down a stream may be preferable for some!

Meeting places

A farm, orchard, allotment or Community Supported Agriculture scheme can offer a place where everyone is welcome, often of special interest to teenagers. For example, it could be a shed, BBQ place, tree house, hammock, fire-pit or picnic table.

Slug contests

The annual biggest slug competition is very horrible. You will need accurate scales rather than a tape measure, and perhaps a pair of gloves. In Egton Bridge in Yorkshire, they wisely opt for the largest gooseberry competition instead.

Special plantings

Fruit trees are often planted in memory after a funeral. But plantings can be made at birthdays or other special days too. A tree such as walnut or mulberry that takes a long while to fruit can be planted at a Christening. Garlic can be

planted on Christmas Eve and harvested at Midsummer. Sweetcorn can be planted in a maze shape at a spring party, for a reunion at the end of the summer. A child's name can be planted in lettuce. A cross-fertile pair of apples can make a nice wedding present.

Maps, banners and posters

When a community makes its own map of a place, it can show what matters. A community's map need not be a surveying masterpiece but could be a work of art. The one produced by Robertsbridge WI is a tapestry hanging in the village hall, showing the old hop fields, the Sussex Cattle Society, the fishing stream, etc. Others, such as Community Action for Food and the Environment, have produced maps showing all the local food outlets, and several groups have made maps of local food trails for days out. Common Ground (see below) produce a publication on parish maps.

You could ask everybody to take a photo of a small thing in the parish or farm that they like to see, or they have known for a long time, or they especially like. It might be a stile, a ring of mushrooms, the dairy man's wellies that sit outside the pub in the evening, or images from the local allotments. You could lend them a disposable camera to take their shot. Then you can make a montage of everybody's photos.

Community centres sometimes hang banners of the local area made by community groups and these can lend themselves to a food and farming theme.

Window boxes

Window boxes can grow food such as herbs and salad. As part of a street party, school project or village in bloom competition you may find several new gardening enthusiasts. Organisers may like to provide seedlings, basic growing instructions, and a wooden crate lined with plastic and filled with reasonable soil.

Festival days and processions

Many places have festival traditions still in living memory, which can be revived and often involve food or agriculture: Mayday, Whitsun,

Valentines Day, St George's Day and so on. Some of these are listed on Common Ground's website. Many ethnic groups also have food festivals and traditions.

Old ways with food

Listening to older people talking about food or old ways of agriculture is rarely a disappointment. This can be arranged by stopping people at a stall on the street or at the farmers' market, helping children make visits to an old people's home, or going to the right pub or coffee morning. In producing a local cookbook in this way, the recipes can be accompanied by a story about how the pig was slaughtered in the yard, how the youngest was always sent to the bakers for fresh yeast on a Saturday, or how the goose feathers were saved for pillows. Elders who have settled here from overseas may have particularly interesting stories.

Wine making

Many towns have a club for brewing enthusiasts who can be invited to join with a local food group, CSA or open farm for a country wine week or stall at a fair, involving sampling, recipe exchanges etc. If you have a local home brewing shop, they may like to help out. *Wild food* has recipes for birch sap, coltsfoot, haw, oak leaf, broom flower, etc.

Safety

For some of the events, organisers will need to think about safety, and check whether they need public liability insurance. The Health and Safety Executive (see below) produce information sheets for farmers and teachers about visiting farms. Environmental Health departments in local authorities can advise about food safety.

Contacts and reading

Books

Flora Britannica

Richard Mabey, published by Sinclair-Stevenson, ISBN 1-85619-377-2

River Cottage Cookbook

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, published by Harper Collins, ISBN 0-00-220204-2

Festivals, Family and Food

Diana Carey and Judy Large, published by Hawthorn Press, ISBN 0-950706-23-X

Wild Food

Roger Phillips, published by Pan Books, ISBN 0-330-28069-4

Traditional Food of Britain

Laura Mason and Catherine Brown, published by Prospect Books, ISBN 0907-325- 874

Organisations

Common Ground

Information about 'local distinctiveness' and ideas to celebrate and explore it.
Gold Hill House, 21 High Street, Shaftesbury, Dorset, SP7 8JE
T: 01747 850 820
E: info@commonground.org.uk
www.commonground.org.uk

Soil Association

Provides a list of organic demonstration farms where local food events may be held.
South Plaza, Marlborough St, Bristol, BS1 3NX
T: 0117 314 5000
www.soilassociation.org/farmvisits

The National Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens

Holds a list of community gardens and city farms where events may be held.
The Green House, Hereford Street, Bedminster, Bristol, BS3 4NA
T: 0117 923 1800
E: admin@farmgarden.org.uk
www.farmgarden.org.uk

The National Association of Farms for Schools

T: 01978 842 277, and **National Farm Attractions Network** T: 01536 513 397
Provides advice to open farms.

Health and Safety Executive

www.hsebooks.co.uk
HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 2WA.
T: 01787 313 995

The Community Development Foundation

A non-departmental public body supported by the Active Community Unit of the Home Office. Its role is to pioneer, study and promote new forms of community development, in order to inform public policy, professional practice and community initiatives.
60 Highbury Grove,
London N5 2AG, UK
T: 020 7226 5375
F: 020 7704 0313
E: admin@cdf.org.uk
www.cdf.org.uk

Development Trusts Association

The community-based regeneration network. It is an independent membership organisation formed by development trust practitioners in 1992.
2-8 Scrutton Street
London EC2A 4RT
T: 0845 458 8336
F: 0845 458 8337
www.dta.org.uk

Websites

Community Tool Box

'How-to' tools for community development. Sections on leadership, strategic planning, community assessment, advocacy, grant writing etc.
<http://ctb.ku.edu/>

www.whyyorganic.org

Soil Association consumer website which includes the online Organic Directory.

See also *Checklist for event organisation and Organic farm visits* action sheets