

Setting up community gardens on the Isle of Arran

Article for the Permaculture UK Blog - Summer 2023

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Over the last three years it has been a privilege to work with hundreds of people who share a common purpose: to grow more food on the Isle of Arran. Since March 2020, there has been an overwhelming response from the communities and villages of Arran to set up five new community gardens and plant food at ten different sites around the island.

It is of course no coincidence that the Arran Pioneer Project began in March 2020: the global pandemic and lockdown led people across the UK to reappraise our fragile food supply chains. On an island like Arran that was particularly acute as those chains are all the more fragile. Very quickly, those of us who had already been working to grow more food on the island, found that many more people were sympathetic to the cause. The Arran Pioneer Project CIC was formed to empower people in our island communities to grow food on disused land.

In a short space of time, hundreds of local people have shown that it can be done, no matter the obstacles. Fences have been built to protect from deer and rabbits, and to keep pigs in so that they can help to tear up bracken. Polytunnels built and protected from the wind. Raised beds created and pallets repurposed for compost heaps. Seaweed gathered, horse dung collected and chicken coops swept. WhatsApp groups started, volunteer days and watering rotas and market days and honesty boxes planned. Bracken and brambles thwarted. Seeds sown and nurtured and harvested. Dozens of fruit trees and soft fruit planted for future years.

Our organisation has helped these things to happen, but we did not instigate them. We have built on a strong tradition of self sufficiency of the people living on our island, those pioneers who have had their own productive gardens for decades and the generations before them. They too have played a crucial role, as advisors with wisdom on everything from what type of apple tree will succeed on Arran or to how to make the best compost from bracken. Many other Arran residents have supported our work by donating towards the gardens and eating the produce, donating sheds and sheeps wool, garden sundries, seedlings and lots of cardboard.

The landowners have shown the willingness to make it happen, whether it be either one of the two estates on the island, local farmers, the National Trust for Scotland, the Arran Medical Group, or the lady who lives in the cottage down the road who owns the old tattle field, all have shown that with collaboration and consensus, communication and dialogue, we can make more space available to grow food for our communities if there is the will to do it.

Empty supermarket shelves are no longer a vision of the future, and whether they are empty because of pandemics or ferries or political circumstance, we all know that it doesn't have to be this way. We know that we can have Arran grown strawberries and tatties and tomatoes and kale and cabbages, and that we don't need to ship this produce in from overseas when it tastes nowhere near as good as when it is grown locally. We can have blueberries and carrots and

pumpkins and onions and garlic and leeks and carrots and asparagus and peas and beans and rainbow chard. We know it because we are demonstrating not only that it can be done, but that it will be done.

Perhaps there is still a long way to go before Arran will be self sufficient in food production, but perhaps not. If the ferry doesn't sail tomorrow, we might not be so far away as we think. The people of Arran have grown their own food before, and they will do so again.

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If you'd like to get involved, you can email us on arran@pioneerproject.scot, or visit our website: <https://pioneerproject.scot/get-involved.html>