



# BECOMING A FORCE FOR NATURE

## Willow Dene Sensory Orchard – Willow Dene Special School, Greenwich, London

In 2015 The Orchard Project teamed up with Willow Dene School; the only special school in Greenwich which meets the needs of children with autism and a wide range of special educational needs aged 2-16. The Orchard Project carried out several sensory consultation sessions with children and staff where they sampled different apple and plum varieties and single variety juices. They also held different fruits of varying shape and colour. The preferences were collated, along with staff suggestions and used to select a range of apple, plum and pear varieties along with a range of soft fruits. 5 members of the school staff attended an Orchard Leader training day and a planting day was organised for the following March.

In March 2016 the planting day was held and 12 fruit trees and approximately 30 soft fruit bushes were planted. Every child at Willow Dene helped plant on the day by having the opportunity to water, dig or plant. To celebrate the day, many of the School's classes made a range of apple, pear and plum based desserts, sharing them with their friends.

*"The school orchard has really added a huge amount of value to our outdoor provision and encouraged more staff to take their children outside... Every school should have an orchard!"*

- Matt Reay, Assistant Head.

The children are taken to the orchard frequently throughout the year to assist with the seasonal maintenance tasks and harvesting, and the staff use these opportunities to meet the school's curricular needs and use the fruit for baking. Children who have sensory diets and need movement breaks often visit the orchard to water the trees. The orchard is also incorporated into the school's Forest School programme which allows the children to interact with nature at their own pace whilst developing thinking, speaking and listening and problem-solving skills.



Thanks to support from our key partners Learning through landscapes and The Orchards Project.

[ltl.org.uk](http://ltl.org.uk), [theorchardproject.org.uk](http://theorchardproject.org.uk), [treecouncil.org.uk](http://treecouncil.org.uk)



# BECOMING A FORCE FOR NATURE

In 2016 the project won the 'Tree and Learning' award from the Forestry Commission London Tree and Woodland Awards (also known as the 'Tree Oscars'!). The school's Orchard Leaders attended the ceremony at City Hall, the Mayor's Office, along with Lewis McNeill from the Orchard Project.

## TOP TIPS

- Involving children of all abilities to be involved in selecting fruit varieties helps to develop a sense of ownership of, and connection to the new space. Colourful photos of different fruits and tasting sessions of fruit and juices are great ways to engage children and give them this opportunity.
- Planting some soft fruit such as red and black currants and raspberries can provide a crop within a year, helping to keep children interested whilst waiting for the main harvest! It also allows younger or disabled children to reach the fruit more easily than tree fruit, and of course provides delicious fruit salads, smoothies and jams!
- Make sure you build in time to celebrate the achievement of creating a new school orchard – finding out about and entering local award schemes for transforming spaces can really boost the school's morale and ensure the effort is celebrated.
- Ensure that there are a range of different tasks available to choose from on the planting day, and indeed in all maintenance days thereafter, so that children with complex needs may choose what they want to participate in.
- Why not consider a Forest Schools programme at your special school? You could have a trained Forest School leader run these sessions, have one of your staff trained as a leader, or simply research the types of activities that are included and encourage staff to carry these out (you don't actually need a trained Forest Schools Leader to run Forest School-type activities, you just can't call it 'Forest Schools'! How about 'Woodland Schools'?!).

Thanks to key partners: The Orchard Project, Willow Dene school, and sponsor RE:LEAF

Websites: <https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk>, <https://www.willowdene.greenwich.sch.uk>



Thanks to support from our key partners Learning through landscapes and The Orchards Project.

[ltl.org.uk](http://ltl.org.uk), [theorchardproject.org.uk](https://www.theorchardproject.org.uk), [treecouncil.org.uk](http://treecouncil.org.uk)