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In our modern days of industrialised agriculture, growing local, healthy, food has become a radical act. In a culture where so many people are alienated from the land and soil, engaging with the systems – natural, economic, social, and political – that bring the food we eat to our plates is unusual. OrganicLea is trying to rebuild these connections by teaching skills, building resilience, and demonstrating that there are ways of producing food that are ecologically sustainable and rooted in local communities.

OrganicLea is a workers' cooperative, based in the Lea Valley region of London, which produces locally sourced food and plants, and supports others in doing the same. Since 2001, members of the cooperative have grown food in locations across the borough; including allotment sites, community spaces, schools, and housing associations. Since 2010 the project has centred around a 12-acre site called the Hawkwood Plant Nursery. This site is owned by the local council, and its original purpose was to grow plants for parks and other sites. However, it is now managed by OrganicLea, who took on a 30-year lease on a peppercorn rent.

The founding members of OrganicLea were active campaigners who saw a synthesis between “front line” environmental activism that they were engaged with on a national or international level and the need to act as locally as possible. They were also inspired by the rich food growing heritage of the Lea Valley, which was once known as the bread basket of London.

It is impossible to understand our relationship with the land, the food we eat, and where it comes from, without also understanding the history of land seizure and enclosure which drove peasants from the land; the Hawkwood site has a fascinating history in this regard. Nowadays, the idea that land can be the private property of an individual is entirely normalised; but, in fact, this is a relatively recent phenomenon, rooted in violence. In the 18th and 19th century, Acts of Parliament empowered the enclosure of open fields and common land in England and Wales, creating legal property rights to land that was previously held in common; many poor people saw their land taken away from them and turned over [to cash crops such as wool](#). Many landless workers moved to work in the industrialising cities, including the land which is now Hawkwood. A manor house once stood on the site, which was originally part of the common-access Epping Forest, which still surrounds the Hawkwood site.

The Hawkwood Plant Nursery is based on what were the grounds of the manor house. One of the most productive areas is was once the kitchen garden. The symbolism of reclaiming for the community what was taken away through violence and occupation is not lost on the members of OrganicLea. Overcoming the obstacles that prevent food producers from having greater access to – and control over – land, seed and water are fundamental to the ethics of the cooperative.

## Food

OrganicLea takes food seriously; partly because food represents and relies upon the wider social, economic, technological, and political factors that govern our lives. A key theme of OrganicLea's work is supporting food sovereignty. OrganicLea is a member of Via Campesina – the international movement of peasants, small- and medium-size farmers, landless people, women farmers, indigenous peoples, migrants and agricultural workers – which defines food sovereignty as:

“The right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. Food sovereignty puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.”

OrganicLea is also a member of the Land Workers' Alliance (itself a member Via Campesina) – a union of small-scale farmers and growers taking action for [food sovereignty in the UK](#). The Land Workers' Alliance

campaigns for policies to increase the number of small- and medium-scale horticultural enterprises in the UK, and to better support them. Through its membership of the Land Workers' Alliance and Via Campesina, OrganicLea is an ally of peasant farmers all over the world, and an expression of a much wider movement to reclaim land and resources.

The Hawkwood site is designed and maintained using permaculture practices, which encourage their practitioners to understand and work sympathetically with natural cycles and systems. The cooperative uses companion planting to encourage natural predators and pollinators and develop the nutrients needed for healthy plants and soil, compost toilets around the site, the cycling of “waste” and reuse and recycling of materials, and harvests rainwater.

In traditional agriculture, huge amounts of fertiliser and pesticides are applied to the soil; at OrganicLea, huge mountains of compost (homemade, and from the local Council's composting scheme) are a testament to their commitment to growing food in ways that allow the earth to flourish.

OrganicLea sees food as an integral part of community, and believes that it's production, distribution and consumption should be firmly rooted in local networks. The project also believes that food should be grown as locally as possible to where it is consumed, that the supply chain should be as small as possible, and that it should build relationships with other growers.

## Business

The food OrganicLea produces is sold at local markets and via a veg box scheme, through which 500 veg boxes are distributed each week. The food in the veg boxes is grown both by OrganicLea and by other local farmers and food growing projects. OrganicLea recognise themselves as part of a much wider network of producers and consumers enabling other small producers outside of London to access the market in the city.

OrganicLea is a business. Indeed, one of the project's *raison d'être*s is to demonstrate that it is possible to grow and sell food in inner-city London and to provide work for its members. In 2017 its income was £500,000, with self-generated income – from selling produce and training – making up 65% of the turnover.

However, the cooperative is also committed to only growing in ways that are sustainable and that allow them to continue and nurture the community surrounding the project. Interwoven into the principles and practices of OrganicLea is a caution of growing too big, and a sense that a just, equal, relationship between producers and consumers has to be built around personal relationships and systems that are owned and governed by local communities. Moreover, they have actively imposed limits on their growth, including ratios of how much of their land, time and energy goes into “cash crops” to the restaurant trade. A key way of balancing this wariness is by encouraging others to grow and flourish. OrganicLea has seeded similar projects in other parts of London, supporting new groups to access resources and decision makers.

## Community

Permaculture underpins the human systems that make up OrganicLea. The cooperative and its wider community are organised in a way that encourages diversity, recognising that it is often at “the edges” where the most exciting, creative work takes place. The organisation tries to see where the energy is, and to follow it.

At the centre of OrganicLea is the cooperative; a core group that manages the work and strategic direction of the project. The cooperative is – at the time of writing – made up of fifteen people, who all work part-time on the project in addition to offering volunteer hours. (Being a paid employee is not a prerequisite to being a member of the cooperative – it is possible to be a member without being paid.) The cooperative makes

decisions by consensus and practices wage parity.

The cooperative is responsible for the running of the business and of the project as a whole. The cooperative exists – in part – to provide work for its members; membership is decided by application and consensus among the current members. Responsibility for the project as a whole is shared, but there is a degree of specialisation. Members are organised into a series of ‘nodes’ which operationally manage work, including production, distribution, finance, policy, outreach, training and ‘systems change’.

OrganicLea wouldn’t exist without the time and commitment of many hundreds of volunteers. Volunteer sessions are run at the Hawkwood site several days a week, working on a range of tasks and activities. Community is built through shared meals prepared using produce grown on site, and parties to celebrate the changing of the seasons. Volunteers have a real sense of ownership over the project and the site, an appreciation of how the systems and practices allow all of the plants, animals and humans within it to thrive. A simple example of this is the commitment to cleaning and maintaining the tools that everyone uses and shares; at the end of a volunteer session, everyone takes the time to clean, dry and oil the equipment they have used, ready for the next person.

Some people volunteer in a fairly *ad hoc* manner. They come to the site as-and-when they can, and enjoy growing food, being outside, and building relationships with others. OrganicLea also provides more structured volunteer support to those who need it. The project takes referrals from a wide range of other projects and services, including statutory bodies, mental health services or other health providers, and specialised units for young people excluded from school. OrganicLea supports individuals to identify specific needs and goals, and how these can be addressed and met during their time at OrganicLea.

OrganicLea also offers training opportunities in specific areas of food growing – from three-month placements to nine-month traineeships, with structured goals and learning. They also run regular horticulture training courses, both classroom- and work-based, which are designed to be accessible to as wide a range of participants as possible.

OrganicLea is far more than the market garden. The Hawkwood site is also the location of a forest school for children, work with marginalised young people, and therapeutic nature and gardening sessions for people in the community with particular needs. It is in the meeting of different people – sometimes those that would not normally meet – that some of the best learning happens. OrganicLea extends far beyond Hawkwood; core to the cooperative’s theory of change is that you can’t expect people to come to you – you have to go to where people are. This belief has led the cooperative to undertaking work in housing associations, schools and other community spaces, setting up community gardens in partnership with residents, and running training courses.

## Summary

OrganicLea’s principles and practices weave together the natural and human ecologies, demonstrating that what we eat, where it’s from, and who grew it and how are integral to what we finally consume. Choosing what we consume is always a political choice; and politics also frames what is available to us. OrganicLea is opening up exciting new opportunities for people across the north-east of London to consume food that is – both literally and politically – rooted in their backyard, in the soil and in the labour of their local community.

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