

Fruit & Veg Alliance - A vision for UK horticulture

Overview

The UK sits at a pivotal time in history. 2020 will be remembered for the year the UK ended its membership of the European Union and forged new trading relationships across the world. It is the year that COVID 19 exposed the frailties of a food supply chain where risks and rewards are unevenly balanced. It is the year when food security became more important than ever, yet self sufficiency in fruit and veg continued to fall. And it is the year in which Part 1 of the National Food strategy was published, showing that only 25% of the population are consuming enough fruit and veg.

All of this sits against a backdrop of the UK's target of bringing all greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050, while the farming industry's ambitions are to achieve this by 2040.

The UK horticulture industry is ambitious and with the right political framework can help address many of these challenges. The Fruit and Veg Alliance has an ambition to work with government to ensure farming policies support a thriving, sustainable and productive horticulture industry.

How UK horticulture delivers for consumers

The UK horticulture sector produces some of the best fresh produce in the world, and with significant investment in the latest technology and growing systems, consumers can enjoy British produce for more months of the year. For example, arguably the most iconic produce, the British strawberry, has seen yields double in the last 20 years and the season extended to nearly 9 months.

As well as delivering quality produce at all price points, UK growers operate to world leading standards of food safety and worker welfare, through audited farm assurance schemes, and by adopting environmental best practise to minimise energy and water use, reduce carbon emissions, and protect the natural environment. Take water, for example. The UK has a moderate climate perfect for growing fruit and veg and most crops are rain fed, yet 74% of the water we consume in fruit and veg is from some of the most water scarce countries in the world.

UK horticulture growers also deliver for the economy, producing F&V worth nearly £4bn and employing 40,000 permanent and 70,000 seasonal workers. Agroecological SMEs are also contributing to local economies and providing skilled employment and enterprise opportunities for new entrants.

The barriers to growth

The fresh produce category is incredibly price sensitive and many products are being sold at the same retail value now as they were 10-20 years ago. This has only been possible through innovation on farm and across the supply chain, but a decline in profitability is resulting in a reducing ability to reinvest. The lack of profitability also creates a barrier for new entrants and smaller producers, and inhibits the sector's ability to attract skilled and ambitious people into the industry.

Confidence in the sector is also hit by uncertainty over seasonal and permanent labour, as freedom of movement comes to an end with limited recognition of agriculture and horticulture shortage occupations. And UK produce risks being undercut by lower standard foods as the government looks to negotiate new trade deals across the world.

Horticulture is a largely unsubsidised sector, unlike some of the UK's key competitors such as the Netherlands which has had huge public investment in production and processing facilities, as well as financial support through the COVID 19 crisis. It is critical the UK government sees the value of the sector, of its production and environmental standards, and develops supportive policies to increase food security.

Setting the political agenda

1. Increasing productivity to be competitive in a global marketplace

Aim: UK growers to be able to invest in the latest technologies and techniques to be internationally competitive while delivering world leading food safety and environmental standards

Policy drivers:

- Development of UK horticulture productivity investment scheme
- Increased investment in R&D across the range of production systems
- Fast tracked investment in, and adoption of, new technologies, automation and robotics
- Access to capital finance/grants

2. Access to labour, skills and new entrants

Aim: Sufficient access to the right people, across all skill levels, and for the sector to attract the brightest individuals to enter and drive the sector forward.

Policy drivers:

- Immigration policy to enable continued access of seasonal workers and recognition on the Shortage Occupation List
- Promotion of horticulture and training opportunities to UK school leavers, students, new entrants and skilled workers

3. Net zero farming and environmentally sustainable businesses

Aim: A circular economy that delivers environmental best practice, reduces waste and improves productivity.

Policy drivers:

- Appropriate recognition of horticultural best practice in ELMS
- A national water framework to reflect sector needs and environmental benefits
- Measures to enhance the environment biodiversity and soil health

4. Routes to market and supply chain fairness

Aim: Capitalising on the range of routes to market for producers of all sizes, and ensuring risk and reward are evenly distributed across the supply chain.

Policy drivers:

- Inclusion of horticulture in the Ag Bill provisions for fairness in the supply chain
- Development of GSCOP code and role of Adjudicator to tackle bad practice across the supply chain.
- Promotion of British produce and UK businesses

5. Improving health through increasing consumption of fruit and veg

Aim: Joint industry government approach to increase consumption of fruit and veg and minimise the health impacts of poor diet on the NHS.

Policy drivers:

- Public engagement and increased promotion of fruit and veg
- Development of government buying standards to increase proportion of British F&V
- Measures to tackle access to better diets for low income consumers.