



Campaign to Protect  
Rural England  
Standing up for your countryside

# CPRE's Vision for the future of farming: The future of horticulture

**Horticulture is defined as the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, flowers and ornamental plants. This document is only concerned with edible crops. Vegetables and salad grown for human consumption make up the largest proportion of the UK's horticultural area.**

Over the last 20 years quantities of home-produced vegetables have decreased by 23% while imports have risen by 51%. In 2010 the UK was only 38% self-sufficient in fruit and only 60% self-sufficient in vegetables.

## Key issues

### *Environment*

The majority of England's peat soils are degraded as a result of various human activities including drainage, industrial pollution and extraction for horticulture. Peat is extracted from areas of lowland peat, predominantly from lowland raised bogs, which occur in flat, low-lying inland locations or basins. Lowland raised bogs are particularly concentrated stores of carbon, with deep underlying peat deposits of up to 10 metres. This is essentially a non-renewable resource as peat forms extremely slowly – at a rate of approximately 1mm a year in those bogs that are still actively peat-forming.

In England, just 5% (approximately 3,727 hectares) of the original lowland bog habitat remains. Intact raised bogs are one of Europe's rarest and most threatened habitats and are home to important and rare species of carnivorous plants, insects and mosses. Peat extraction has also had a clear impact on the preservation of archaeological and historical records. For example, an assessment of the impact of peat cutting in the Somerset Levels alone concluded that of 175 identified archaeological sites, 48 had been partially or totally destroyed by peat extraction over the last 150 years.

We currently use just under 3 million cubic metres of peat every year in the UK, enough to fill around 19,000 double-decker buses. The majority is bought by amateur gardeners (69%) from retail outlets as multi-purpose compost and growbags. The professional horticulture sector, and in particular growers of food and ornamental plants, are also significant peat users (30%). Progress has been made in reducing peat use in response to a previous voluntary target (for 90% of the total market to be peat-free in 2010), but the market is still only 57.5% peat free. The Government

has proposed completely phasing out the use of peat in growing mediums by 2030 and introducing more sustainable alternatives.

### *Polytunnels*

Polytunnels are frames covered in transparent polythene which are used to grow and harvest crops in sheltered conditions.

The so-called Spanish type of polytunnel was first used in England in 1993. Spanish polytunnels provide the opportunity for nearly year-round cultivation of soft fruit, vegetables and other crops. Crops can be grown in the soil covered by polytunnels, or 'table grown' on irrigated platforms above the ground.

When they appear in a landscape, especially when large areas are covered, they change its appearance dramatically. Intensive growing in polytunnels can also cause damage to the condition of the soil and create severe drainage problems.

### *Economics*

The horticulture sector produces over 9 million tonnes of fruit, vegetables and potatoes and employs 37,000 people in permanent jobs and 56,000 seasonal workers every



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year. However, a survey of horticultural businesses in 2011 revealed that about a quarter failed to make a profit.

Despite England having some of the best growing conditions for fruit and vegetables, the quantity of domestically produced fruit has fallen significantly. But while our low self-sufficiency levels can partly be explained by our taste for fruit that cannot be grown in the UK, self-sufficiency in fruits indigenous to the UK, such as apples, pears and plums, is also very low. This can largely be attributed to the massive decline in UK apple production, which almost halved between 1989 and 2003.

### The future of horticulture?

Located on the Isle of Thanet in Kent, Thanet Earth has been producing crops since October 2008. When completed it will be the UK's largest single production site growing salad crops (tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers, but not leafy greens such as lettuce) under glass. It will cover 90 hectares of land, equivalent to 80 football pitches.

Crops are grown hydroponically, in nutrient-enriched water rather than soil, which allows the suspension of the crops at waist height rather than ground level, for ease of picking. To minimise pesticide use Thanet Earth uses insect pest predators. The crops grown at Thanet Earth are packed on site and supplied to supermarkets in the South East of England.

The greenhouse used for growing tomatoes is lit during the winter months, allowing tomatoes to be grown all year round. To minimise light pollution, the tomato greenhouse is fitted with a system of blinds which exist to trap the light and warmth inside. The blinds are designed to retain around 95% of the artificial light within the greenhouse, although their effectiveness has been questioned.

The complex is powered by combined heat and power systems that create heat, power and carbon dioxide (which is absorbed by the plants) for the greenhouses.



**Despite England having some of the best growing conditions for fruit the quantity of domestically produced fruit has fallen significantly**

Thanet Earth claims its method of growing salad crops is one of the most water-efficient available and has constructed seven large reservoirs on the site to store the rainwater collected from the roofs of the glasshouses which provides 55% of the required water for the site. In addition water is collected and recycled from the previous day's watering, amounting to 20% of daily requirements.

### The future of horticulture: CPRE's vision

We would like to see the amount of domestically produced fruit, salads and vegetables increased and we believe the Government should do more to encourage hospitals, prisons, the armed forces and other areas of the public sector to source more domestically produced horticultural crops, providing a lead which we hope others would follow.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator should ensure fairer contracts in the horticultural sector between producers, suppliers and retailers, for example providing greater certainty in terms of pricing. We would also like retailers to commit to selling a much greater proportion of British produce when it is in season.

We acknowledge the economic pressures facing the horticultural sector, from imports and the contractual demands of retailers, but we do not believe this should be used as justification to grow crops using polytunnels over large areas of farmland. CPRE is not calling for a ban on British farmers producing horticultural crops using polytunnels and we believe polytunnels have a place in the diverse English farmed landscape. But their location, scale, design and management are of great importance as polytunnels can have significant effects on landscape, soil and amenity. Decisions about their construction should be made transparently, taking into account the wider public interest. Polytunnels should not be allowed to cause significant damage to the environment. The interests and amenity of local residents should be taken into account and protected.

Construction of large areas of polytunnels should not be permitted in designated landscapes. We want a fair and consistent planning process that gives local people and farmers a fair say. The aim should be to prevent other businesses (such as those dependent on tourism) being damaged by a proliferation of polytunnels. We welcomed a commitment from the Government to take forward one of the key recommendations of the Farming Regulation Task Force (2011), which is to take another look at the issues associated with polytunnels.

It has been argued that it might be more environmentally sustainable (and minimise impacts on landscape character) to grow fruit and vegetable crops for supermarkets by developing large-scale regional production sites similar to Thanet Earth. However, although this type of production can provide specific environmental benefits, such as using energy and water more sustainably, we would be concerned

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if horticultural production became concentrated across just a few sites around the country.

An alternative would be to encourage stronger Producer Organisations (legal entities receiving European funding to support groups of producers), but these must be focused on supporting environmentally sustainable production, more effective collaboration and negotiating better returns from large retailers.

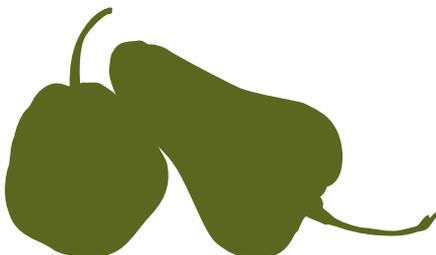
This could also help fruit and vegetable producers that are important for local food networks, supplying seasonal produce direct to local consumers, restaurants and hotels, through box schemes for example. This could help producers to increase the returns they receive from their crops.

CPRE believes that although the focus of any Government action should be on reducing the use of peat for home gardening, the horticulture sector should also undertake to phase out peat and use alternative growing mediums by 2020, given that the voluntary target has been missed by more than a third, and so little lowland peat bog remains.

CPRE successfully lobbied for traditional orchards to be made a priority for Higher Level Environmental Stewardship funding and against stricter controls on the grazing of livestock in traditional orchards proposed by the Food Standards Agency. We would like to see more support for restoring and maintaining traditional orchards through agri-environment schemes and other rural development programme measures. This could help owners of traditional orchards to tap into the growing market for cider and perry.

#### What you can do

- Seek out and buy locally produced, seasonal fruit and vegetables from local producers.
- When buying fruit, salad or vegetables ask the retailer where they have been supplied from, and whether they have been grown using peat or in polytunnels. Explain why you are concerned about the impacts on the environment and the character of the countryside.
- Find out more about your local food webs by visiting: [www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-do/farming-and-food/local-foods](http://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-do/farming-and-food/local-foods).



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