

Efforts to boost blueberry production launched

SCOTTISH CROP RESEARCH INSTITUTE TEAM AIMS TO INCREASE THE UK'S SHARE IN DOMESTIC MARKET

BY JOE WATSON

Scottish agricultural researchers have launched efforts to dramatically boost the UK production of blueberries – the superfruit rich in health-giving antioxidants.

Just 3% of booming UK sales are met by British growers with supermarkets and juice makers instead having to import most of their requirements from the US, Chile, Spain and Poland.

A team at the Scottish Crop Research Institute is, however, hoping to address that by identifying existing varieties best suited to the UK climate and soils as well as breeding new plants specifically for Britain.

The plans were revealed yesterday by the world-renowned institute as it held its annual fruit for the future day at its base at Invergowrie in Perthshire.

Susan McCallum, the institute's principal investigative officer and one of the team involved in the project, said 38 existing varieties have been tested at five sites, including at Blairgowrie, Perth, SCRI itself, Herefordshire and Dorset.

Blueberries are notoriously difficult to grow and require exacting soil conditions that have a pH of about 4.5. They have small shallow roots and are susceptible to overwatering and drought.

Once established, the plant can, however, yield berries for over 30 years. The plants at SCRI are still providing crops after 40 years.

Miss McCallum said the work, being funded through the HortLink initiative, was exciting as blueberries of-

fered a real alternative for soft fruit growers as they were in demand.

The team will also look at extending the UK growing season, currently from June to October, and will identify those varieties best suited for outdoor production, inside polytunnels and machine harvesting.

Miss McCallum added: "We will be assessing various characteristics, the yield, the visual fruit quality, the season and whether early, mid or late and what infections and diseases they are susceptible to.

"We'll also be studying the taste, flavour, sweetness and sourness, the appearance and juice yields."

Miss McCallum admitted it could take some time for the project to reach its final conclusions as plants can take three years to yield their first berries after planting and as many as seven to reach their full harvest potential.

The event also heard about a new £5million research project SCRI is involved in with other soft fruit research teams in Norway, Germany and Denmark.

It aims to help soft fruit growers in nations surrounding the North Sea to combat the impact climate change may have on the production of blackcurrants, redcurrants, raspberries and gooseberries.

Project leader Michelle

Williams said the hope was to breed new varieties better able to cope with extreme weather events such as late frosts, wet weather and drought. Trials are already under way. SCRI is to play a key role in assessing crops.

The work is also looking at reducing chemical use on soft fruit. Ms Williams said if Europe ended up importing fruit from abroad then it would not be able to impose the same level of controls on the chemicals used on the fruit and in the allowable pesticide residue levels.

All the berries are known to benefit health and the work will also focus on research that has already identified them as helping prevent heart disease and cancer.

Growers were also updated by SCRI's Scott Johnson on ongoing efforts by researchers to identify naturally occurring predators and substances to tackle disease and aphid attacks.

This included work on parasitic wasps and ladybirds which eat large raspberry aphids. He also spoke about so-called biocontrols being used to address the problems caused by vine weevils in rasps.

The weevils attack the roots of rasp canes. The roots have, however, been shown to send out chemical distress signals which attract a type of nematode worm that could then

eat the weevils. Mr Johnson said: "There has been some early success."

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