

Take a bigger bite of fruitful blueberry market, Scots growers urged

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SCOTLAND has had a good reputation for producing soft fruit, largely raspberries and strawberries.

But now another crop is very much in demand: Scottish growers are having to raise their game in growing blueberries.

Currently, only somewhere between 1 per cent and 3 per cent of the tonnage of blueberries that are consumed in the UK are home-produced fruit. That proportion is unlikely to rise substantially in the short term, partly because of the pace of the rise in demand and partly because it can take up to five years to get a crop into full production.

However, Dr Susan McCallum of the Scottish Crop Research Institute in Dundee is heading a team of research workers looking into improving the viability of growing the crop in this country.

Ironically, the first blueberry bushes were planted at SCRI some 40 years ago by Murray Cormack but few took notice of this initiative. It has only been in recent years when the healthy anti-oxidant aspects of eating blueberries have been fully understood that there has been

a resurgence of interest in the crop.

While Dr McCallum admitted that the five-year wait between planting and full cropping might be seen as a disadvantage

by some growers, she pointed out that the bushes planted four decades ago were still in full production.

The wide aims of the research work range from pinning down the beneficial genes within existing varieties in order to help breeders bring out cultivars more suited to the climate of this country, through to extending the harvest period in order to avoid clashing with the production peaks of fruit from Poland and other blueberry-producing countries.

The ability to machine-harvest the crop and the yield

of juice are also factors that Dr McCallum and her team want to promote, as they believe that in addition to the demand from the fresh market, there is massive potential in the processed or juice sector.

Meanwhile in another research project, scientists in five northern European countries are working on how best to deal with climate change.

Speaking at the same seminar at SCRI, Dr Michelle Williams of Aarhus University, Denmark, said there were now considerable problems arising in some

crops from the more volatile weather.

The blackcurrant crop in northern Europe has in recent years been affected by a lack of cold weather – with the excep-

tion of the most recent winter – which is essential for plants that require a dormancy period.

As a result, flowering and thereafter fruiting can be affected, leaving a very uneven ripen-

ing period at harvest. Again, further breeding work is required to identify how best to counteract this problem.

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Researchers believe there is massive potential in the juice sector
