

## UK and Ireland largest markets for Dutch strawberry plant propagator

**The UK and Ireland are the largest markets for Dutch strawberry plant-raiser Beeren Plantproducts. Steven Vale tours the company's new premises and visits the production fields to see the strawberry waiting-bed plant harvest.**

This story began in 1955 when company founder Sjeng Beeren began growing asparagus - produced from his own asparagus crowns. Requests from local growers to buy crowns quickly followed, and two decades later, when son Wim succeeded his father in 1976, leek plant raising was added to their activities.

Fast-forwarding another 20 years, by the 1990s the family's customer-base had expanded across the border and some of



The lifting of this season's waiting-bed plants started on 20 November and finished just before Christmas.



Lifting one bed at a time, the company operates two Dutch-made Basrijs harvesters.

their German asparagus customers enquired as to whether they could also supply them with strawberry plants, with the two crops being a popular combination in Germany. The family accepted the challenge, and soon discovered that strawberries suited their operation well, and the three crops resulted in an even spread of the workload from March to December.

The family-owned business has come a long way in 62 years, during which time the area used for plant production has increased from a couple of hectares in the late 1950s to



Spaced at 27cm, each 1.5m-wide bed contains four rows of plants.

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200ha today. One of the largest companies in Europe for asparagus crowns and leek plants (yearly average of 10 million and 180 million respectively), the subject of this story is the 2.5 million strawberry plants the company produces each year.

Wim's son John – the third generation - joined the business in 2002 and, although Wim is still in the office every day, John now heads up the successful family business. There are much larger strawberry plant raisers, but John reckons that the key

strong points of being a smaller player are the short chain of command, personal contact with customers, and attention to detail. The UK and Ireland are the most important markets for the business. "These two markets currently taking 70% of production," John said, adding, "The remainder is destined for customers in Holland, Belgium and Germany."



**Director John Beeren inspects Sonata plants. In total, his company lifts 2.5 million waiting-bed plants each year.**

One of the busiest strawberry plant propagation periods is the lifting of the 25ha of waiting-bed plants, that generally starts during the third week of November and ends a month later, with enough time for seasonal staff to return home for



**Four of the John Deere tractors are equipped with GPS.**

Christmas. We timed our visit to arrive in the middle of the harvest, when they were lifting Sonata plants.

Dutch-made Basrijs harvesters are popular with Holland's strawberry plant raisers, but no two machines are the same, because growers' have them tailor-made for their circumstances. This includes Beeren's two machines, the oldest of which was bought three years ago, and the newest arrived for this season. Each one cost around €75,000. The toughest work for the two machines is to lift 50ha of asparagus crowns, when each one is required to dig down to around 40cm. This puts a great deal of strain on all the belts and bearings, which, combined with the high numbers of hours of operation, are the two main reasons why they part-exchange machines after just five or six years.

The lifting of strawberry waiting-bed plants is much gentler on the harvesters, and one machine is generally sufficient to lift the entire 25ha. The strawberry plant production process begins in March when 5ha of mother plants are planted out. These are lifted in August, and the tips are removed and planted; it is these that we saw being lifted. Each 1.5m-wide bed contains four rows spaced at 27cm, and during an average day the harvester lifts 1ha, working



**John Beeren, who heads up the successful Beeren Plant products business.**

longer hours and lifting more plants when rain is forecast, and unloading a steady

stream of plants directly into boxes. It was evident that the family's tractor fleet is all John Deere. They have eleven of the green tractors, and appeared to be over-powered. But we are informed that this is not so, and during peak periods (March/April and July/August) all eleven tractors are needed. This includes the oldest, a 1640 model built in 1980 that has clocked up a very respectable 14,200 hours, and is still used to pull one of the smaller strawberry planters.

After lifting, the young plants are transported to the company



Opened in 2014, the new buildings house the offices, canteen and plant-grading facilities, and all the tractors and machines.

headquarters for sorting. Built in 2014, the new premises replaced the previous 1980s buildings. Everything is new, including the main office, staff canteen and washroom building, which provides direct access to the grading shed, cold-store, workshop, machine shed and seasonal staff accommodation.

Each of the four grading lines provides space for 13 workers and, during the asparagus crown harvest in April, all four are needed, when the full-time workforce of six grows to 50. Two grading lines and a staff of around 30, are sufficient to tackle the waiting-bed plants, and during a nine-hour day they grade 1ha of plants. It is important to cool the plants as quickly as possible, and while the interior of the building is not heated, the concrete on which the workers stand is. Conveyor belts below each grading table quickly and quietly whisk all rubbish out of the building and



One of the four grading lines, each of which provides space for 13 workers.

into an adjacent one that provides storage space for a week.

The plants are sorted into bunches of ten. At the time of our visit the outdoor temperature was 8-9C, and in the first cold-store this is reduced to 0-1C within 24 hours of harvesting. The boxes containing the plants are then trucked to another cold-store, where they are kept at -2.2C (-1.5C inside the box), where they remain until delivery, which usually starts in March and ends in August. A track-and-trace system allows them to follow the plants from harvesting to delivery.

There are no immediate plans to change the tractor fleet, and the last three were bought new without part-exchanging any of the older ones. However, given the requirement that all 11 tractors are needed during busy periods, as well as four or five contractors' machines, then some of the 10 to 15-year-old tractors might soon need updating. Ten of the family's John Deere tractors are powered by four-cylinder engines, and these lighter tractors are ideal to reduce soil compaction. The only exception is the six-cylinder 6150R, which at 150hp is their most powerful tractor and was purchased to pull a new Lemken four-furrow plough and press, giving them more capacity over the previous set-up of a 6430 pulling a three-furrow plough. To acquire a more powerful model would seem unlikely as the average size of their fields is 3ha. "This is ideal for 3m-wide machines. We have no need for a 48m sprayer boom or 6m-wide cultivators," said John.

The soil in the area is a mixture of sand and loam, and being free-draining, it absorbs 10mm of rain quickly, allowing the harvesting team to return to the field the next day. The usual rotation with strawberry plant raising is to grow the crop for three successive years, followed by two years of break crops such as cereals, sugar beet, peas or beans, and then to return to strawberries. Finding new land has become easier than it was a couple of years ago. Prices for a wide range of crops are under pressure, and some farmers have found it a more sensible option to rent their



A conveyor belt moves all waste quietly and quickly out of the building.



Sorted into bunches of 10, the waiting-bed plants are returned to a box, ready for cold-storage.



The first stage of the cooling process is to reduce the plants' temperature to 0-1C within 24 hours.

land. Labour is also, for now at least, not an issue, and all 30 Polish workers employed last season returned this year. "This simplifies things," added John, "and we have a great team of seasonal workers."

There are no plans to change from solely plant-raising to produce fresh strawberries, leeks and asparagus. "We decided not to do this and to focus on plant production. We are purely plant-raisers striving to produce the highest quality possible."


John admits to being at a crossroads regarding varietal choice. In the 1990s Elsanta was the main variety, which has gradually paved the way to Sonata. More recently

Malling Centenary has become popular, but there is no shortage of other promising material, and he says that they must react to changing requirements. He draws a comparison with asparagus. "Ten years ago, in 2007, we grew seven different varieties. Today, this number has risen to 20. With strawberries, it is difficult to decide what the market wants, but we could quite easily end up with 10 varieties in the future." They are currently deciding which ones could be important for their customers in the future. "The next step for us is an important one, and while we currently talk about June-bearers, in the future this could include everbearers." ◆




Purchased earlier this year, the 6130R is the company's most powerful 4-cylinder John Deere tractor. It is pictured here with three generations of the Beeren family: Wim (left), John (right) and his three-year-old son Jens.


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