

# FARM PROFILE

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Variety is the spice of life at New Cross Fruit Farm, where hand picked asparagus is one of a number of crops which have revitalised the Somerset business, as **Aly Balsom** reports.

## Grower shuns 'boring' to produce 'sexy' fruit and veg

**W**illiam Hebditch's growing policy is focused around producing 'sexy' fruit and vegetables which customers struggle to resist.

That suggests there is some kind of planning behind his farm strategy, although he admits his approach is far more random than pre-meditated, with various pockets of experimental vegetables popping up around the farm – sea kale being one of them.

"I'm a total messer," he explains. "I like messing with different crops. I like to do different things. It's a very definite choice we've made to have a multiplicity of crops. It's not the most efficient and from an agronomy point of view it complicates things."

### Traditional focus

Dessert apples had traditionally been the primary focus of the farm under William's father, with about 81 hectares (200 acres) of the fruit grown at its peak. He had also

William Hebditch with the morning's cut of hand picked asparagus.



PICTURES: SAM CLARKE

introduced blackcurrants – a crop the farm has been growing for Ribena for more than 60 years.

In 2000, William had a self-proclaimed 'midlife crisis' and decided to sell some land, clear debts, sell some buildings for development and rent out the farm. But, after four years away from agriculture –

including a term studying for a masters in environmental policy – he decided farming was for him after all.

Returning to the farm in 2004, he took drastic action, ripping out apple trees and planting what he describes as vanity crops, such as cherries.

Blackcurrants are supplied to Ribena.





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WILLIAM HEBDITCH

That was also the first year asparagus was reintroduced to the farm following a spell growing it in the 1980s.

Various other crops have also since appeared, including rhubarb, gooseberries, plums and raspberries.

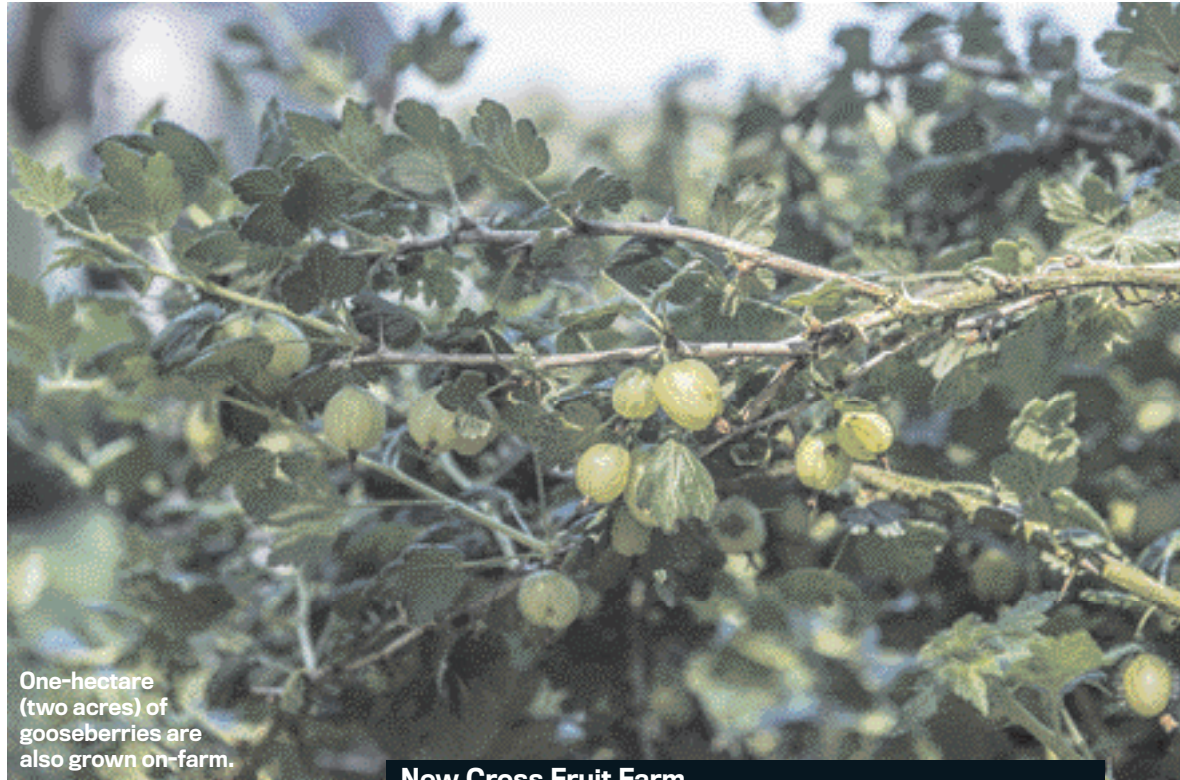
William, who is married to Liz, says: "The apple market has become very mature and a commodity so you always buy apples, like you buy an orange.

"It's boring and we wanted to go in a different direction away from bulk apple growing towards growing more sexy things.

"You can't walk past a punnet of really good cherries or a bunch of fresh asparagus – it's difficult not to pick up either."

Having started growing 2ha (six acres) of asparagus, the business now grows 5ha (12 acres), with sales making up 15 per cent of total farm income.

Forty per cent of sales are



One-hectare (two acres) of gooseberries are also grown on-farm.

through the on-site farm shop, which is a simple set up of a couple of fridges and pallets of other fresh produce located next to the asparagus packing area.

On-site sales include trade with local restaurants and pubs, which pick up from site. The rest of the asparagus is sold wholesale in Bristol through Total Produce.

Throughout his fruit growing career, William has remained ferociously independent and avoided being part of any grower co-ops to avoid any potential restraints. It is this he believes which has helped the business be where it is today.

"We wanted to be independent and do our own thing. We're still standing when a lot of other fruit growers have disappeared," he says.

## Fresh and local

His approach to growing a niche product, such as asparagus, is no doubt part of that.

"We're fresh and local and move things fast through our system. We're after quality.

"We charge a higher price at the farmgate as we guarantee it's fresh and been cut that morning. That's the same with all our stuff. We aim to get it out really fresh," he explains.

The asparagus is hand cut daily by the farm team who wear the New Cross Fruit Farm colours of navy blue and red on branded t-shirts.

Starting at 7am, they walk the fields to selectively harvest spears which are at their target 20cm (7.8in) in height. They work rapidly

## New Cross Fruit Farm

- Joint operation between William and Liz Hebditch
- The Hebditch family moved to the farm in 1901
- 69-hectare (170-acre) farm
- Acreage includes: Five hectares (12 acres) asparagus, 1ha (2.47 acres) raspberries, 1ha (2.47 acres) gooseberries, 10ha (24.7 acres) plums, 5ha (12 acres) apples, 34ha (80-85 acres) of blackcurrants, 0.4ha (one-acre) rhubarb
- Forty per cent of the farm is blackcurrants which makes up 30

- per cent of its income
- All fruit and asparagus are hand picked – except for the blackcurrants
- One additional full-time member of staff and the rest season labour
- Morello cherries sold to Somerset Cider Brandy Company to produce a cherry brandy product
- New Cross Farm asparagus ends up in michelin star restaurant Casamia, in Bristol



Rhubarb is one of many fruits grown at New Cross Fruit Farm.

up and down the rows, bending over each asparagus spear to measure whether it is ready for picking using a wooden spatula with measurements as a guide and a steak knife for cutting.

Each asparagus plant or crown will have several spears at varying lengths, with cutting stimulating growth of the following spears.

Overall, the crop averages 3-3.5t/ha (1.1-1.4t/acre), with peak yields of 4-4.5t/ha (1.6-1.8t/acre) around year four of production (see box). At that time, an asparagus crown will produce about 28 spears in a season.

As soon as the spears are harvested, they are taken to the nearby packing shed where a team of five





Asparagus is bundled into bunches of 10.



## Asparagus

- Asparagus is a member of the lily family
- The main seasonal window for asparagus runs from the end of April until June
- Asparagus thrives during a cool spring which is not too wet and not too dry
- It can grow up to 10cm (4in) in one day
- Sizes range from slender, young 'sprue' asparagus to thicker-stemmed, jumbo-sized 'kitchen' grades
- Asparagus contains vitamin K, essential for healthy blood clotting
- It is a rich source of vitamin C, which boosts your immune system
- Top accompaniments for asparagus are butter, Parmesan, hollandaise and vinaigrette, eggs, bacon or pancetta

sort and pack the asparagus on the same morning as harvest.

A sorting machine is loaded by hand, which automatically grades the spears into small, medium or large, based on the 'butt diameter.' It also trims the ends and washes them.

The graded crop is then manually weighed and bundled into bunches of 10 with the farm logo.

Each bunch weighs 250g and is packaged into boxes which are collected in the day and reach the Bristol wholesale market by 3am.

Hand picking may be a strong selling point, but it means the business is heavily reliant on labour from eastern Europe. With this in mind, William believes Brexit is

one of the biggest challenges facing the business.

"Seasonal labour is vital to us as we have been using eastern European seasonal labour since 1996. Without that, our business wouldn't have survived. If we can't access foreign labour post-Brexit, it's the end to anything that's hand picked and we will have to walk away from it," he says.

### Seasonal produce

At present, the aim of the business is to produce seasonal produce from April until the end of September, with seasonal labour leaving the farm on October 2 to leave a quiet spell over winter where there is no fresh produce on-farm.

When it comes to asparagus, William and Liz try to extend the harvest window as long as possible by using a selection of varieties to make the most of the early season premium.

Four varieties are used in total including Mondeo, Gijnlim, Backlim and Guelph Millennium. Mondeo and Gijnlim are the earliest types and will be covered with a thermic polythene closh at the start of March.

William says: "In March, the air temperature in the tunnels is 40degC, which helps warm up the soils.

"We started cutting on April 1 this year, which gives us a two-week early start to the season."

This early asparagus commands a 50-60 per cent premium compared to that grown in the main growing season.

Nationally, the asparagus market has grown in recent years, with more now making its way onto supermarket shelves. But William has made a conscious decision not to increase production any further. In fact, he has turned down offers of supplying London restaurants such as The Ledbury.

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WILLIAM HEBDITCH

Being in what he describes as the twilight of their careers and with none of their children keen to take on the business, William has instead chosen to focus on doing what they do best and produce quality produce which acts as the ultimate temptation to buyers.

"We're local. It's all about food miles and provenance and we don't want to go that way into London."

The asparagus is hand cut daily by the farm team.



### Asparagus: How it is grown at New Cross Fruit Farm

- One-year-old asparagus crowns are brought-in from Holland and planted in furrows in March
- At least 10cm (4in) of dirt covers each crown, with plants 20cm (7.8in) apart in single rows
- A small ridge around the plant helps stability
- They like free draining soil, around pH 6.5 with P and K indices of 3
- A first, very light cut will be taken in year two
- The third year will be the first proper cut, over about six weeks
- By year four the plant has reached full production
- A thermic, polythene closh will be used on early varieties to bring the harvest window forward
- Harvest runs from April to mid-late June
- Nitrogen and a herbicide to control perennial weeds is applied at the end of the season
- The plant is left to grow from July to September and produces

- two metres (6ft 5in) of foliage
- This foliage stage is crucial to the success of the following season's crop and pushes energy down into the roots to power the spear production
- The greenery goes brown in autumn - this is mowed off in November and incorporated through shallow cultivation
- Weed killer is applied in early spring and pre-emergence
- The plant lasts about 10 years and then will have to be replaced