

# *J & A Growers Ltd*

## **Nursery Blog – April 2024**

Here we are once again, waiting for a better spell of weather to dry out the soaked land before we can contemplate making seedbeds. We were in the exact same situation a year ago, trying to be patient while knowing the delay was building our workload ahead.

Well, last spring it did dry out eventually and we managed to get the seed sowing done, but that was over a month later than normal for all crops. The weather then turned very dry for the next month from the moment we started sowing, but this wasn't good for germination or establishment as the land baked dry. There was also continuous wind which interfered with irrigation patterns day and night, some areas getting too much water and others not getting enough. You have to be careful what you wish for though, as it turned back to regular rain for the remainder of the summer which carried on right through the winter.

This past winter has been tough for all field-growers from the north of Scotland to the south of England. In the past six months we have recorded almost a full year's average rainfall. When will it stop?

We do wonder though, 'if this is the new normal' with extreme weather patterns which last for prolonged periods. If so, we need to consider how we can make changes within the business to try and mitigate the effects on our cropping – not convinced there is a quick and easy solution!





## On the nursery

One positive we can take from this past winter is that our tracked, full-bed harvesting machine has managed to stay afloat and harvest most of our crops, usually working in the worst of conditions. We weren't harvesting for many weeks until the full bed lifter was the only machine which would travel. The single row harvester didn't even leave the shed for over two months between November and January, it just wouldn't have been able to cope, especially with a trailer towed behind. Having the new harvester certainly saved the team an awful lot of hand picking.

It looks like we have done less compaction damage to the soil whilst harvesting with the new machine too, which runs on 70cm wide tracks. The tractor and trailer alongside catching the crop, travel on the neighboring bed wheeling's, so we don't go on the middle part of the cropped bed,

which is where we have damaged the soil most in the past. Hopefully the soil will be in better condition when we start to work the land and create new beds.

We managed to get sufficient graders to fill the team, mostly with returnees from our long-term Romanian workers, plus a few of their family and friends to fill the spare slots. It all sounds very straightforward, but there have been some challenges for us. Any new workers who don't have pre-settled / settled status need to go through the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Scheme (SAWS) and require a visa allowing them to work in the UK for up to 6 months. They obtain this through one of the government's approved labour providers, which we got registered with and it all matches up. The challenge was the extra workload this created for us to become approved, requiring new policies for things we had never even considered and much of it felt totally irrelevant to our setting and size of workforce.

We are finding that many of the younger workers we have employed over the past couple of years have a different work ethic to what we have been used to and one that doesn't always match our business needs. This will no doubt become a bigger challenge for us in the future, even though we strive to keep making their accommodation and working conditions as comfortable as possible and keep them happy. At the same time we are working with universities and robotic engineers to develop robots which will do some, or hopefully all of the repetitive tasks we do, such as weeding, grading, counting and bundling. This will reduce our dependency on seasonal workers in the future.

## **Technology**

In May 2024 an autonomous field robot (CLAWS) will be arriving at J & A Growers from Earth Rover, to start trials in our crops. The first stage is to map the fields and nursery beds before testing the vision technology that has been developed. This has been based on work done last summer when we took many photos of our crops from above, until full crop canopy was achieved (early July until late August – this was later in the year than normal). These pictures were then used to build up the AI so far to distinguish weeds in the crops. The robot will be collecting further AI during each test run, which will build up and keep improving upon the level of accuracy in weed identification. Once this is at an acceptable level they can turn on the weed zapping part, which uses concentrated light to burn the meristem of the individual weeds. We will be very excited to get to this stage of final testing.

The HTA are organizing the FutureGrow Expo on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2024 at Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth. This event is still in the early stages of organising, but it will give a very welcome platform connecting growers to developers and manufacturers of cutting-edge technology relevant to horticulture. There will be some live demos and many new things for all to see from tree to cut-flower production and indoor to outdoor growing.

## **Summer Events**

HTA Tree & Hedging group AGM (11/12 June 2024)

- RJ Trees and Hedging Ltd, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire

FutureGrow Expo. (8<sup>th</sup> October 2024)

- Stoneleigh Park, Kenilworth, Warwickshire