

J & A Growers Ltd

Nursery Blog – April 2021

Welcome to the fourteenth edition of our Nursery Blog.

Had this been written at the start of March then I am sure it would have started with some grumbling about the terrible harvest conditions (having to resort to hand lifting 25km of nursery beds) and general winter slog. But with a bit of sun on our backs over the past few weeks the land has dried, some fine seedbeds have been raised and sowing is nicely on track. Although we have woken to a frost on many a morning in April, it hasn't been too alarming whilst most seedlings are still beneath the surface but this has now changed and seedlings are now emerging.

It is a really exciting time for nurseries just now. This winter saw strong demand for nursery stock and all signs suggest it will remain that way for the foreseeable future. It is easy to get lost in potential planting forecast figures, but demand could increase dramatically if England and Wales manage to start achieving their planting ambitions and as Carbon offsetting becomes a normal business activity. There is also the new ELMS scheme which is likely to trigger some changes in farming practices and encourage land owners to plant more trees and hedges. All of this could accumulate to a significant increase in demand from current levels which is going to raise some serious challenges for the nursery sector. This is all good for the industry and allows our businesses to operate with a bit more confidence, without forgetting the huge benefit to the environment.

J & A Growers have welcomed the recent Harvesting and Processing Grant supported by DEFRA and administered through the Scottish Government. During the first round released in 2020, we managed to get three projects accepted as detailed below:

- 1) **Construction of a new reservoir** – This was completed and lined at the end of March and will be filled during winter 2021/22, at which point we will forfeit one of our summer extraction licenses in exchange for a winter filling license. The reservoir will hold approximately 40,000 cubic metres when full, so should provide sufficient capacity for our summer requirements.



Digging the reservoir

It was interesting to see the soil profile as they dug down. Our topsoil was removed then there was a couple of metres of sand and gravel which eventually exposed some heavy marl clay and the water table. The excavator handlers soon realized their job wasn't just as plain sailing at that point, but we all knew it was there after it had shown up in the sample digs.



Reservoir after lining

- 2) **A new five-bed CM Regero steaming machine, water bowser and diesel bowser** – With the current loss of Basamid soil sterilant and the unknown degree of restrictions if approval is regained, in autumn 2020 we made some swift decisions while the manufacturers of the steaming machines still had capacity to build for spring 2021. With fruit, veg and salad producers all thinking the same thing, there wasn't any time to waste and a grant application was submitted as quickly as possible. However, buying the steaming machine is only one part of the requirement as it needs a constant water supply (around 1000 litres per hour) and re-fueling daily, so we have bought a 10,000 litre water bowser and a 6,000 litre diesel bowser under a separate grant application. The machine has just arrived from France and has been put straight to work.



New steaming machine

- 3) **Design and building of a five-row harvesting machine** - We have commissioned a Yorkshire engineering company, Jones Engineering, who specialise in the design and development of vegetable machinery, to design, develop and build a 5 row self-propelled harvester with the aim of an output capacity of in-excess of three and half times what a single row harvester achieves. The harvester will be mounted on tracks to avoid doing damage to the soil and will be computer controlled to aid auto steering and harvesting speed, it will be fully equipped with work lights to allow night-time working to happen.

Unfortunately, due to the downturn over the last 30 years in Forestry Planting on a global scale there has been little investment in new technology so the key machines available today are the same as they were 30 years ago. Two attempts have been made in the past at developing this type of machine, one in Germany and one in the Netherlands, both machines were built by a Swiss company (Baertschi) and both are still work in progress for various reasons. Having discussed these projects with the owners of the machines we are in a position to learn from their short comings and develop a machine which will allow nurseries to harvest plants when conditions are good through the winter months and avoid having to fall back on hand harvesting when ground conditions are such that tractors are unable to get on the land.

Research

The AHDB have had the following Belgian research document translated, it gives some very interesting information regarding fertilizer use in field grown nursery crops. It is well worth a read, follow the link below:

[Sustainable fertiliser use in field-grown ornamental crops guide | AHDB](#)

Hopefully life will continue moving back towards the old normal as we progress into the summer. We very much look forward to the next opportunity to meet. Until then, wishing you all a good summer and hoping for a warm and occasionally damp growing season.