

J & A Growers Ltd

Nursery Blog – October 2021

Welcome to the fifteenth edition of our Nursery Blog.

Finally, we have some normality back in our lives!!!

It was fantastic to meet face to face with those who travelled to the HTA Tree & Hedging group AGM in Yorkshire, hosted by Johnsons of Whixley in their 100th year since they were established. Travelling around their sites was such a pleasure, seeing their vast range of quality stock and meeting up with fellow nursery colleagues to share our experiences of the past year. This type of gathering has felt well overdue.

Whilst we are all experiencing a time of strong demand for our stock, it isn't without its' challenges and the lack of available workers currently being the number one talking point. Many nurseries are already struggling to secure both full-time and seasonal workers and those who aren't yet are fearing the problem in the not-so-distant future. What a challenge at a time when there is an increasing demand for nursery plants and an emphasis on home-grown stock. This issue alone has the potential to seriously hamper the UK government's ambitious targets of planting 30,000ha of woodland per year by 2025. As such, many nurseries are wondering whether they can maintain their current production levels, never mind expanding.

It is going to take significant investment and time to try and reduce our labour requirements by anything substantial. There are many labour demanding tasks on our nurseries with no mechanical or off-the-shelf alternatives available. We need more academic bodies or 'bright sparks' who are willing to team up with the horticultural sector and offer new thoughts and ideas of ways to carry out these repetitive tasks. The top of our list, which has been for many years, is the singulation of plants using robotics or automation. Once this can be achieved the vision technology is already available to grade and sort.

Harvesting and Processing Grant

With thanks to the second round of the Harvesting and Processing Grant, supported by DEFRA and administered through the Scottish Forestry, J & A Growers have had a new underground water main installed. It is a circular ring that we can tap into at various points around our fields. We will start using it this winter to fill our new reservoir with water pumped from the river Avon under a winter abstraction license. This will secure 40,000 cubic metres of water for us to use next summer to grow the crops.

The project that we commissioned to Jones Engineering in Yorkshire, to design and build a new self-propelled 5-row harvesting machine, is also receiving funding through the Harvesting and Processing Grant. The build is progressing well, despite some issues in obtaining certain electrical items and they are predicting we will get to trial it on site by the end of November. We don't for one moment think that it will be the finished article when it first arrives, but hopefully it will just be some minor tweaks that are needed.

Initial thoughts to Steam Sterilisation

At the time of writing our last newsletter this spring, we had just taken delivery of a new five-bed CM Regero steaming machine. We put it straight to work and used it to steam treat the beds for our precision sown Sitka crop. There were frosty mornings on most days in April and both soil temperatures and daytime air temperatures were unseasonably low. To reach the required temperature in the top 5cm of soil each press of the machine was set for seven minutes, but rain did halt work for a large part of May.

The important question now is..... has it worked?

We are pleased with the results that we have seen through this first summer. The seedlings have germinated and performed as expected and the weed problem has been no worse than usual. The huge bonus for us is the fact that Basamid did not control the Cranesbill weed yet steaming the ground has been working well and this is the most abundant weed on our recently acquired land.

This summer we steamed land during August which may seem very early when the seeds will not be sown until next spring, but there is a very good reason behind this. In August we were able to prepare very nice penetrable beds and at that time of year soil and air temperatures are good. As a result, we were able to reduce to five minute per press to reach the same soil temperature as earlier in the year. Financially, this makes quite a saving, using nearly 30% less fuel per area of land.

The photo below (taken in mid-October) clearly shows the difference between the steamed beds to the right where the machine passed over these at the end of August, compared to the un-steamed beds to the left. All the beds were prepared at the same time in mid-August. There will no doubt be some weed seeds that blow onto this land and germinate, so along with the weeds in the wheel-markings which don't get steamed, these will be sprayed with glyphosate now and will no doubt need a repeat dose in the spring. A dead weed is a good weed!



Best wishes for a good season.