

Kent entrepreneur becomes first English producer of aronia berries

Andrew Tickle, of Ash near Sevenoaks, Kent is the first English grower to successfully produce aronia berries. The berries originated in America and were introduced into Europe during the 1950s and have been described as one of the world's healthiest berries.

Andrew trained as a civil engineer and from 1983 he ran an agricultural contracting business. In 1999 he bought a small farm near Gravesend where he undertook third party contract packing for Kent Veg and Saphir, employing five tractor drivers and 15 packers. "We were also one of the first to grow rocket leaves and coriander," said Andrew. After the firm was sold, Andrew diversified into creating a children's soft play centre and marketing GPS farm mapping services.

"I see civil engineering and farming as complementary and disciplined businesses," he said.

A few years ago, Andrew read a paper entitled: "Minor crops: an alternative for the UK fruit industry". It had been written by Felicidad Fernandez, a researcher at East Malling Research. It was immediately obvious that there was a potential for the berry in the UK, not least because they are also widely produced in North America and the EU grows over 6000ha.

Having undertaken extensive market research, Andrew visited Eastern Poland in 2011 where he purchased 2000 aronia plants. "We were delighted that by 2012 every single one of the 2000 plants on a hectare of grade three land at Johnsons Farm had established successfully," he said.

A second planting of another 2000 plants



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showed similar growth in 2013. Little is known about growing aronia berries in the UK, so Andrew has retained the services and support of a local agronomy company.

Determined to bridge his knowledge gap, he enrolled on a degree course in horticulture at Hadlow College, Kent. "I simply purchased the first year module in plant science from the degree course. This has given me the theoretical knowledge and understanding of how to grow aronia berries," he said. His participation on the Hadlow course inspired a dissertation about aronia berries by one of his fellow students. "She obtained a first class honours degree for her work, which was pleasing," he said. The Hadlow experience has also resulted in Andrew being invited to lecture to students about novel crops, which he much enjoys.

Aronia berry bushes can grow to two metres and more, in both height and width. Growth from nursery size cuttings to a very large bush will take about three years, and just one Aronia berry bush is capable of producing over 13kg of fruit.

The berries grow in clusters and have been compared to cranberries, blueberries and blackcurrants. Their taste is extremely sharp and very



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distinctive. "They are better as an ingredient or as a juice rather than as a punnet fruit," commented Andrew.

This year Andrew has invested in a purpose-built, MAREK aronia berry harvester. It was manufactured by the Dom-Wid company, located near Lodz, Poland (www.dom-wid.pl) and is due for delivery shortly. The machine is tractor-drawn and will harvest the 2015 crop in September. Each aronia berry plant should yield approximately 10kg, making mechanical harvesting the only cost-effective option. "I looked at five different harvesting machines made by various companies. In addition to the competitive price of the Dom-Wid harvester, I was impressed by the fact that Dominik Widarski was himself a successful aronia berry grower. This influenced my decision to buy his machine rather than those of his competitors," he said. The harvester employs a vigorous mechanical shaking process to remove the berries from the plant, similar to the process used for blackcurrants.

Andrew Tickle is indebted to his friend, Salwek Kasprzyk, a bilingual Polish farmer living and working in the UK who accompanied him on the trip, acting as an interpreter and guide throughout the visit.

Marketing and public relations

"My niece thought of the brand name 'TickleBerries'" he explains. She said, "Since no-one knows what they are, you can call them what you like!"

Juicing is undertaken at Johnsons Farm where about



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1500 bottles of aronia juice were produced and sold in 2014 with confident forecasts of 6000 bottles in 2015. Three 330ml bottles sell for £16.66. Most sales have originated from the website - www.aroniaberries.co.uk - with a very good response from the health and wellbeing sector. "We have one customer who purchases 40 bottles every other month", says Andrew. The big plus point for sales via the website is that customers come to him, incurring minimal

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Juicing is undertaken at Johnsons Farm. Photo: Thomas Richards Photography.

advertising costs.

The challenge now is to identify which other sectors will provide the best sales potential. In addition to his own research, Andrew employs a marketing consultant who is actively engaged in identifying future, profitable markets. "The key is targeting the market and spreading the word in that market, because we are still in the early stages of introducing aronia berries to the UK," he explains. What is

happening successfully in the USA and the EU demonstrates the potential for success and the profitability which could be achieved.

"We already have two chefs who are helping us. They are producing and testing some new and exciting recipes using aronia berries," he explained. TickleBerries Aronia Jelly sauce is a delicious accompaniment with most cheeses, whilst aronia juice can be added to champagne and cocktails, making an exciting, new and refreshing drink. Adding aronia juice to apple juice or cider is also a superb combination; the permutations are endless.

Andrew has applied for SALSA (Safe and Local Supplier Approval) accreditation, and TickleBerries is currently undergoing this assessment challenge. With accreditation through a series of audits undertaken to meet with binding compliance protocols, the company's products should appeal to wholesalers, distributors and even supermarkets. "The costs associated with compliance issues could easily kill off any profits from this business, but it is the only way we can present a complete package to marketeers and buyers. The old saying 'it's not growing the crop that is the problem, it is the selling of it', is certainly true with this project," reflected Andrew.

TickleBerries is a member of the Produced in Kent group which supports local producers through their website and activities. This is helpful in supporting sales and providing useful background facts about TickleBerries. "We are particularly delighted with the role that social media is playing in the development of the company," commented Andrew. Through the Produced in Kent website and details about the berries via Twitter (@Aronia_UK) awareness is now growing in the health and wellbeing sector. Within an hour one message had been re-tweeted to 13,000 people! "Quite amazing" he said.

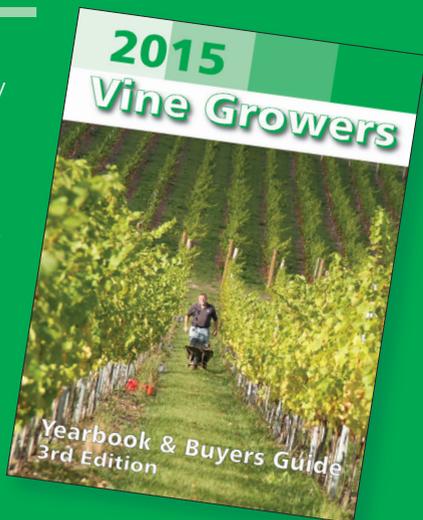
"I am genuinely pleased with our progress to date. The plants have grown well and look healthy, our juice is selling on the internet and we are flexible enough to adapt to the challenges in front of us," concluded Andrew. ◆



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The Vine Growers Yearbook is out now

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