

Life is a bowl of cherry tomatoes



BARCLAYS

This holding has been entered for the Yorkshire Post — Barclays Bank Farm of the Year Award for 1998-99.

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A MAJOR capital investment in a state-of-the-art grading machine has been made by an East Yorkshire grower of cherry tomatoes.

The decision means that Tony Leake, of Aldbrough, near Hull, has committed himself to supplying supermarkets and wholesale outlets with top class produce.

As well as having large-scale arable farming interests, Mr Leake has run a glasshouse nursery at Preston, near Hull, for the past 30 years, producing lettuce, celery and bedding plants.

Four years ago the demand for flat lettuce diminished, so he decided to switch to growing cherry tomatoes.

It is a niche market and extremely labour and capital intensive, but Mr Leake has decided to face up squarely to the task of meeting the exact quality requirements laid down by the supermarkets.

In the past, most cherry tomatoes have been imported from Holland, Spain and Israel on account of the...

Growers, at Welton, near Hull, and Hedon Salads who shrink wrap and label the 250 gramme punnets — containing about 20 tomatoes — ready for delivery to supermarket shelves.

Preston Nurseries also supplies major wholesale markets throughout the country using wholesale commission agents, East Riding Growers.

Mr Dunling said: "Prior to installing the machine we couldn't grade to the quality required by the supermarkets but this problem has now been solved because it sorts the cherry tomatoes into the colour and size they require."

"In the past we could not compete with foreign imports but we can now meet the same stringent quality standards and are aiming to increase production."

The variety grown is Favourite and the young plants are supplied by breeders Premier Plants at nearby Keyingham and Crystal Heart, at Gilbertdyke.

Planting starts in the glasshouses on January 13 and no spraying for disease or pests take place.

Instead the nursery relies on biological control methods harnessing the aid of parasitic wasps to control whitefly and leaf miner —

the two major pests of the tomato plant.

The wasps are microscopic in size and are imported from Holland.

A weekly pest count is carried out and the wasps are introduced accordingly.

Bumble bees, also imported from Holland, are harnessed to pollinate the flowers.

The tomatoes are fed by a drip-irrigation system and it takes 68 days from planting to picking.

Mr Dunling, a former horticultural student at the Bishop Burton College of Agriculture, near Beverley, has worked on the nursery for the past five years.

He also oversees the production of four acres of green celery which is supplied to a marketing organisation in Shropshire.

The overall business has just become a member of Assured Produce, a traceability scheme aimed at addressing the concerns and needs of consumers, retailers and growers for safe food of good quality and at affordable prices.

The idea is to achieve this by the application of a code of scientifically-based good horticultural practice with emphasis on reducing, wherever possible, the use of chemical pesticides and by promoting viable integrated crop management systems.

