



Landworkers Alliance Response to House of Lords Horticulture Select Committee Report 'Sowing the Seeds'

14th November 2023

It is unfortunate that the LWA Submission to the HoL Horticulture Enquiry failed to be taken into account due to a clerical error, as our perspective would have filled the large gap between high tech and large scale growers selling to supermarkets and community gardeners, allotment holders and domestic ornamental growers growing for leisure. While each of these ends of the spectrum has its challenges and contributes significant volumes of produce and/or physical and mental health benefits, our LWA submission, "[A Bright Future for Horticulture](#)" showcased how SME organic and agroecological growers combine these roles, whilst also attracting new entrants into the sector, delivering biodiversity and climate change benefits and rewarding growers with a greater percentage of the sale price of their produce.

Despite this omission, we welcome much of the tone of the "Sowing the Seeds" report, which highlights horticulture as having a vital role in "supporting health, wellbeing and climate change agendas". We wholeheartedly support the HoL Select Committee's recommendation that the Government "should recognise nutritional security as a public good and properly incentivise horticultural growers to deliver against its public health ambitions. (Paragraph 611)". We particularly welcome the calls for long term thinking on horticulture, delivered as a horticulture strategy for England, as called for in the Government Food Strategy (see para 14) and a cross departmental horticultural sector working group. Both recommendations would contribute significantly to building a united sense of purpose and hope for the future, at a time when multiple challenges mean the future looks bleak. We also support the call for the appointment of "a Minister with specific horticultural responsibilities to provide direction and accountability for the sector" (para 22). We believe that horticulture is a special case, compared to other agricultural sectors, due to the urgent need to improve resilience of the domestic supply of a food category that is essential to our health and well-being, while horticulture is also a sector that includes professional and amateur production of both edible and ornamental crops.

A number of other points in the report stand out for praise, most notably:

- Environment - In relation to ELMS, although we support all four of the recommendations relating to ELMS (30-33), we don't share the negative assessment of ELMS held by some of the other consultees. The recent announcement that the 5ha threshold for accessing ELMS will be dropped, combined with the much higher payment rates in published in the SFI23 handbook and the promise of specific horticulture and organic SFI actions in 2024, give us hope that Defra will integrate the findings of LWA's Growing the Goods ELMS trial into the scheme next year.
- Domestic supply - The emphasis on the need to prioritise setting targets for food self-sufficiency and reconsider its interpretation of international trade rules and the perceived barriers to promoting British food (para 90). We also support the Committee's recommendation to encourage customer awareness of seasonality.
- Supply chain fairness - While few, if any, LWA members sell via supermarket, we strongly support the statement on supply chain fairness that, "there should be balance in the share of risk, responsibility and reward across all parties in the supply chain in order to maintain business viability and to avoid the subsequent risk that "we will drive out the next generation from our sector". (para. 60)
- Education and Training - Recommendations 164, 165 and 171, which address the need for early years and secondary education in horticulture, as well as acknowledging the need to make horticultural careers accessible to people from a much more diverse range of backgrounds, are extremely valuable and echo our experience. Many of our members in LWA have come into horticulture through a lifelong passion which they feel has not been nurtured at all by the education system, which has actively discouraged people who are bright from taking up careers in horticulture. The LWA also would welcome changes to the Apprenticeship Levy, which does not, at present, meet the training needs of the agroecological and organic horticulture sector (para 191).
- Housing and Planning - We especially appreciate the recommendation in para 223 that recognises the significance of the lack of affordable rural housing as a barrier to people working in horticulture. In an LWA members meeting on horticulture this week, housing and the difficulty of getting planning permission for rural workers dwellings were cited as the number one barrier to the ambitious plans we have to expand the sector. The cost of housing also has an impact on disposable income and therefore the ability of shoppers to pay prices for fruit and vegetables that cover the real costs of production.
- Public procurement - We welcome the recognition of the role public procurement could play in providing a strong market for UK produce, while increasing the provision of sustainably produced, healthy fruits and vegetables to public sector organisations (Paragraph 612) We support recommendations 612-615 relating to various public health initiatives.
- Environmental measurement and lifecycle analysis - The emphasis on finding a single way to measure and compare carbon emissions from horticulture is very welcome, and we support the call for ELMS to encourage uptake of such measurement techniques. Indeed, our ELMS Trial, Growing the Goods, recommends that carbon calculation and

other methods of environmental measurement should be considered actions rewarded by payment.

- Energy efficiency - The detailed description of the “carrot and stick” approach being taken by the Dutch Government to encourage integrated investment in renewable energy and reduce pollution in protected cropping provides a valuable insight. We urge the Government to adopt a similar approach, to provide confidence to investors that a long term strategy exists to support such innovation.
- Research and Development - The concept of the Dutch “quadruple helix” approach to horticultural research, involving civil society, as well as industry, government and academia is of great interest to LWA. Our work in founding the Agroecological Research Collaboration (ARC), in encouraging farmer led research and building stronger relationships with academic institutions, aligns with such a partnership approach. We echo Ben Raskin’s (Soil Association) view that too much R&D funding is focussed on expensive technological solutions such as robotics, AI and gene editing, while better value for money could be achieved by directing a larger proportion of research funding on lower tech innovation. Overall, we welcome recommendation (para 558) that “Future R&D strategies should consider the value of on-farm and low-tech innovations and be willing to give smaller grants to small scale projects”, while also supporting the Committee’s call for longer term core funding to support advances in edible horticulture.
- Health benefits of fruit and vegetables - It is encouraging that the HoL report focussed significant attention on the concept of “nutritional security”, while also taking evidence from several witnesses about the physical and mental health benefits of allotment and community gardening. This holistic approach to horticulture, which acknowledges the contribution of all growers from domestic gardeners, through commercial organic market gardeners and growers, to large scale orchard, soft fruit, vegetable and glasshouse growers would contribute significantly to not only revitalising the UK horticulture sector, but to improving public health.
- Conditions for Migrant Workers - We welcome the focus on working conditions for farmworkers recruited via the Seasonal Worker Visa. In particular, the recommendations that immigration enforcement be separated from welfare inspections (para 269); the reduction of the visa application fee to cost price (para 249); reforms to tax codes that would increase worker incomes at no additional cost to employers (para 249); an Employer Pays approach to the NHS surcharge (para 235); and extension of visa lengths to 9 months (para 235) are all necessary improvements to the scheme.

Our most significant misgivings about the “Sowing the Seeds” centre on the priority given to unproven forms of production, such as vertical farming and gene editing. Vertical farming, while having a small footprint in terms of area and being energy efficient, requires significant resources to provide its infrastructure (plastic and metal trays, piping, LEDs, growing substrates) and inputs (fertilisers). We urge the Government to carry out extensive life cycle analysis to compare vertical farming with conventional and organic/agroecological farming before committing to a policy of encouraging vertical farming over more traditional forms of production relying on soil and sunlight. Peri-urban farming is capable of producing high yields of similar

high value crops (salad leaves, tomatoes, cucumbers) using renewable resources, while also engaging and building the skills of the public.

We also disagree with the report's unequivocal support for gene editing, to increase drought resilience and resistance to plant pests. If a fraction of the R&D funding that has been invested into gene editing were directed towards further development and training in existing production practices for managing water efficiently, improving soil water capacity and natural pest management, these technologies would not be necessary. Many organic growers fear that gene editing will reduce the pool of non-gene edited varieties they can use, as commercial non-gene edited varieties cease to be adequately maintained due to loss of commercial viability.

We also have misgivings about Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) as a mechanism for funding nature friendly farming, due to the difference in value between long established natural ecosystems that are being traded (on sites being developed) for more temporary, production related features such as herbal leys, beetle banks and wildflower margins. While the latter are beneficial in their own right, in no way do they make up for the loss of a complex climax woodland or the habitat provided by extensive scrub. We amplify the view of Steph Wetherell from Bristol Food Producers when she says "the destruction of one established habitat is not equal to the creation of a new habitat" (para 482) and urge the Government to take a cautious approach to BNG.

Finally, we are concerned by the recommendation that the new F&V Aid Scheme should be better tailored to a consolidated UK horticulture industry (Para 566). It is precisely the consolidated, or concentrated, nature of the modern retail sector which provides so few marketing options for growers that they find themselves in a weak political position compared to supermarkets when negotiating prices. The new F&V Aid Scheme needs to support the development of diverse and resilient horticulture supply and marketing system, where "farmer focussed routes to market" that enable growers to be paid reasonable prices for their produce are given a larger market share and growers are able to choose between different supply chains where they will sell their produce.

To conclude, "Sowing the Seeds" is an extremely useful document providing a detailed and yet broad overview of the horticulture sector, when it is truly at a crossroads. It contains many valuable recommendations, which the Government would be well advised to implement. The will exists within the horticulture sector to work together with Government to address the multiple and significant challenges facing horticulture. The future success of UK horticulture depends, however, on swift and bold cross departmental action from the Government. The House of Lords Report presents an opportunity for our new Secretary of State for the Environment, Steve Barclay, to make his mark, by reinstating the plan to create a bold and visionary long term horticulture strategy for England.