

Watercress takes centre stage in summer of British salad



It's been a great start to the watercress season – how would you describe production up until now?

The year got off to a terrific start when we had a superb piece of coverage on BBC's *Countryfile*, which boosted sales by around 30 per cent. This has been sustained throughout February, March and April, helped by the generation of further PR-led stories. Demand has tailed off a little over the last week due to the much colder and wetter weather in many parts of the country and the coming on stream of other British seasonal vegetable crops.

The good weather meant the English season started a little earlier, at the beginning of May. The rest of the salad industry was under pressure because of the lack of rain and the need to irrigate; we don't have those challenges because we cultivate our crops using spring or borehole water, from deep in the chalk aquifers, so this was a benefit.

Should we expect to see more volume on the market this season, then?

Yields are on target and quality has been very good, helped by good strong light levels. Because of the huge leap in demand so early on, we managed to reprogramme our business accordingly and so no orders have been shorted at any stage.

The salads category has had a great start and traditional English staple watercress has been no exception. Elizabeth O'Keefe talks to The Watercress Company's Tom Amery, after the annual kick off to the season that is the Watercress Festival in Alresford, about how the season has played out so far and what we can expect to see this summer

Are consumers buying into watercress's regional provenance more?

Although demand has been fantastic, we have noticed that some supermarkets have undertraded and sold out from time to time, maybe because they don't want wastage. Another factor could be unexpected increases in consumer demand influenced by positive media

Now the British season is in full swing, consumers want the British product. Some retailers market watercress with a special regional Hampshire bag and this outperforms the national watercress bag in the same stores

coverage of watercress – whatever the reason it does mean a loss of potential sales.

When we had the huge surge in demand in January, it showed that consumers were quite happy to buy watercress from America – they were just buying into the whole watercress story. But now the British season is in full

This year's Watercress Festival



swing, consumers want the British product. Some retailers market watercress with a special regional Hampshire bag and this outperforms the national watercress bag in the same stores, so it shows that when offered the choice people do like a regional offering.

Do they understand how it is produced and where it comes from?

The key thrust of our PR campaign is telling people where the product comes from, how it is grown and how healthy it is, and people are really receptive to this message. The 15,000 people who flocked to our Watercress Festival on 15 May is evidence of this. Provenance is very important to us and we have a great story to tell. If you ask someone nowadays about watercress, the chances are that they will know it is a 'superfood', so we are getting our message across. Eight years ago before the PR campaign, run by Mustard Communications, launched, one in two people thought watercress was the stuff they grew on blotting paper at school. Nowadays it is a very different story and the industry has been completely revitalised.

Are supermarkets supporting the product?

Yes, in many ways. A key goal is to ensure good signage and point of sale as this can often lead to more successful long-term sales than a price promotion. ■