

Stemming

the tide of waste

The cut flower industry is bigger than the music industry, with the former demanding an average spend of £36 per person.

But with more than 90 per cent of the UK market imported, it means business isn't easy for the likes of Crosslands Flower Nursery.

For fourth generation farmer Ben Cross being an alstroemeria grower is not just a job, 'it is a passion, it is a lifestyle,' and it is also the basis of his mission to get people thinking about where their flowers come from.

"Food has got a lot better, you have your Jamies and your Jimmies and your Hugh Fearnley Whittingstalls," he lists, "you have probably seen the piles of waste.

"This is just like the parsnips and courgettes, supermarkets can say 'we want this much this week' and then 24 hours before delivery say they don't."

Competition from abroad and strict grading criteria which rules each stem should weigh 22.1 grams means thousands upon thousands from Crosslands are going to waste each year.

"The dump pile gets taller than me," reveals Ben, adding that prices are so low for the ones not meeting the 'standard' that they 'save money by throwing it away - rather than paying for the electric on the cutting machine and the wrapping'.

Walking around the three acres of pristine greenhouses and seeing the care that goes into each and every row makes this extra hard to hear.

What's more, it only takes two months to go from root to being ready for harvest and at its peak the flowers can be picked at 6am and be ready again at 6pm meaning there's no shortage of supply.

Ben's family started the business in 1957. However with his great-grandfather being an original member of the Land Settlement Association - an initiative in the 1930s to create rural small-holdings and ease the unemployment crisis - the story begins even earlier.

"The government set up plots of land, with Sidlesham being one of the 'biggest,'" explains Ben, "so it has been going, really, since 1936/37."

Now it is believed to be the last in the area offering cut flowers in a full colour range, all year round and that is something Ben is fighting to keep.

"It is very rare in this country now, not just Sussex," he says. "So what I am trying to do is

LAURA CARTLEDGE heads to Crosslands Flower Nursery and learns more about how we need to help the British industry grow.



For details on Crosslands Flower Nursery, Barnham Lane, Walberton, follow @Alstroemeria Ben on Twitter or findrosslandsFlower Nursery on Facebook.



Ben Cross

cut out the middle men who don't care.

"It means people can say 'this was picked from the ground by Ben yesterday'.

"We pick when they are ripe, the ones who ship don't - they like to pick when they are small so they can pack more in," adds Ben. "But it would be like picking a banana when it is green or a strawberry when it is yellow. We pick the fat buds and we don't spray the stems or leaves like the importers do."

As well as being healthier when it gets to your vase at home, it is better for the environment as the nursery uses biomass heating and no air miles.

Money also talks and this direct approach also means the British grown produce, which

is often sold at a premium, actually works out cheaper.

The posies, instead of being put on the compost, are being put up for sale in places such as local farm shops while Ben travels across the county and beyond to get his message out there.

This includes going into places like Brinsbury College and Highbury College 'to try and get florists interested early doors'.

Despite all this Ben is doubtful the flower industry will follow in the strides food production and awareness has taken.

"Not unless someone listens to me," he shrugs, "I just have to keep on trying and getting the message out."