

Biodiversity to benefit as wildlife protocol recruits first glasshouse grower

One of the country's leading glasshouse growers of herbs, cress and tomatoes is the first of its kind to sign up to the Conservation Grade protocol, specifically designed to maximise yields of both crops and wildlife.

West Sussex-based VHB Herbs, a leading supplier of Fresh Herbs to the UK market worth £96 million. VHB Herbs has qualified for the protocol and can now feature the Nature Friendly Farming bee logo on selected lines of its products.



The company has run several wildlife projects recently as part of a wider ethical approach to growing, which eliminated the use of insecticides 14 years ago and instead uses beneficial insects to control pests. However, entry into Conservation Grade signifies a change of approach to proactively farming wildlife rather than letting it develop naturally explains technical director Chris Moncrieff.

“Retailers want suppliers who are improving their sustainability, and consumers are increasingly looking for products that will deliver specific benefits such as increased wildlife,” he says.

“Becoming part of the Conservation Grade ‘movement’ ticks those boxes for us because it delivers tangible, quantifiable results and has a strong consumer-facing brand.

“We’ve approximately six acres – 10 per cent of our total farm area – of managed wildlife land, which includes a water meadow and an indigenous tree area. These areas are now being farmed to provide habitats for animals



such as grass snakes and stoats, and migratory birds like long tailed tits, as well as allowing rare types of rushes and sedges to grow. A number of wild orchids have also self-established recently.”

He stresses that the increase in insect populations is one of the most important aspects of the scheme. “Although our crops are all under glass, we know the importance of encouraging populations of pollinators; we use bumble bees with all our tomatoes because they’re the least aggressive – so there’s less risk of employees being stung!”

In trials, the protocol resulted in a thirteen fold increase in bumblebees, as well as a 41 per cent increase in birds, an eightfold increase in butterflies, and a thirty fold increase in small mammals such as water voles within certain habitats on the farm. This was significantly higher than many results from conventional or even organic farming systems*.

Shelley Abbott of Conservation Grade says: “The nature-friendly farming approach offers food growers and the public a valuable way to invest in natural capital – rewarding farmers directly for deliberately stimulating wildlife.”

VHB Herbs is part of the Vitacress Group and has two sites in West Sussex with around 230 full time employees working in 80,000m² of glasshouses; between them, the two sites produce over 14 million fresh potted herbs and over 23 million packs of fresh cut herbs per year. The UK retail fresh herbs market is growing at around four per cent year on year in value terms. The top four bestselling lines are coriander, basil, flat leaf parsley and curly parsley.

VHB Herbs joins an increasing number of brands, including Allied Mills and Jordans, that are applying the protocol and will be looking at the option of adding the ‘bee’ of the Nature Friendly Farming label on produce.

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Notes to Editors

*TEEB – The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity for National and International Policy Makers – Summary: Responding to the Value of Nature 2009.

VHB Herbs

VHB began producing fresh herbs in 1989 and today is the UK's largest producer / supplier of fresh herbs to the UK retail market. Its two nurseries produce over 16 million fresh potted herbs per year and its packhouse supplies over 23 million packs of fresh cut herbs per year, sourced from its own production and selected other British and overseas growers. At any one time the business can have around one and three-quarter million pots in various stages of development. VHB Herbs been producing Salad Cress at its West End Nursery for over 40 years and today it supplies over 12 million punnets of salad cress per year. It also grows four acres of speciality tomatoes at its Runcton Nursery near Chichester in West Sussex.

www.vhbherbs.co.uk

Conservation Grade – Seven Key Requirements

In return for a contracted premium price for their grain, the Conservation Grade protocol places seven key requirements on its farmers:

1. Comply with Conservation Grade production standards.
2. Commit 10% of the farmed area to a specific range of managed wildlife habitats.
3. Hold full membership of an approved Assured Food Standards farm assurance scheme.
4. Participate in induction and annual Conservation Grade training programmes.
5. Create a whole farm environment plan.
6. Pass an annual independent CMI audit and five yearly habitat assessment.
7. Be members of the Guild of Conservation Grade Producers.

Conservation Grade Habitats

Conservation Grade farmers are required to use a minimum of 10% of their farmed land for the creation and management of a specific range of habitats for wildlife. The habitats must be created and managed in the ratios prescribed to create the optimum conditions to promote biodiversity on the farm. Conservation Grade habitats are designed to be congruent with the UK Government's agri-environmental stewardship (ES) schemes such as Entry Level (ELS) and Higher Level (HLS), as well as other EU environmental stewardship programmes.

Farmer Benefits

All Conservation Grade farmers have access to a secure supply contract for their produce for which licensees guarantee a premium over the market price in return for implementing the CG standards on their farmed land. Because of this commercial continuity, Conservation Grade creates a model for both profitable farming and practical wildlife conservation.

Conservation Grade Research

As part of this ongoing commitment, Conservation Grade has established its own research programme. As of June 2011, this includes the following initiatives:

- A four year research project with the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust, (commenced in 2009) to look at: (i) improved habitat creation associated with hedgerows and linear features; and (ii) habitat rotation options. This work is taking place on four, geographically dispersed farms in Norfolk, Leicester, Bedford and Dorset.
- A three year joint PhD research project with Reading University and BBSRC (to commence in 2011), comparing biodiversity benefits on CG farms with controls.
- A suite of 12-15 one year MRes and MSc research projects (between 2011 and 2014) on CG-specific ecological and socioeconomic topics.
- A 3 year study with the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology has recently (2009) been completed; looking at the environmental impact and cost of a variety of seed mixes, as well as their optimum location on the farm.

Recognition

Conservation Grade is a truly unique system of sustainable farming, founded on science and commercial viability. It is congruent with, but greatly out performs government agri-environment schemes, and as such is singularly recognised by The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) study. TEEB is the leading international policy initiative charged by G8, the EU, and Defra with identifying and promulgating sustainable production systems capable of making a meaningful contribution to the conservation of global biodiversity by the private sector.

www.conservationgrade.org