

Going nuts for nuts

Could Brexit and a boom in healthy snacks help UK growers crack an under-supplied market? Sue Scott went to ask Kent's 'Mr Nut.'

As occupations go, being the UK's only registered agricultural nut consultant is quite a conversation opener. And, right now, Alexander Hunt is having plenty of them.

A grower himself, member of Coutts Bank's rural property panel and with a background in rural estate agency, Hunt is probably best known for making a disproportionately large noise about one of the UK's tiniest crops – cobnuts. From the *Daily Telegraph* to *Country Life* magazine, *Woman & Home* to the BBC, his avuncular style and inspiring enthusiasm has earned him a reputation for being able to talk about filberts (as they're also known) to almost filibustering lengths.

But after years of championing a crop so small that it doesn't even make it on to Defra's horticultural statistics list, Hunt has all but made his case to consumers. "Five years ago we were really only selling from August through to Christmas," he says. "Now, customers are buying year round. Even sales this March were significantly up."

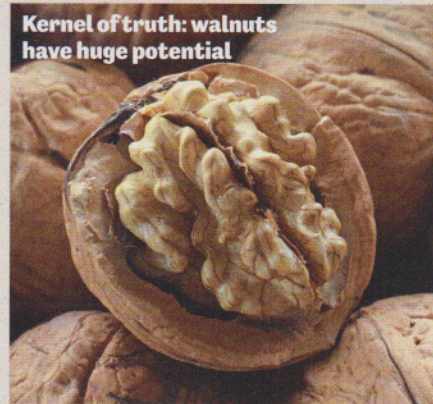
A combination of health messaging, trend-setting celebrity chefs and the increasing influence of the 'vegetarian pound' as non-meat eaters and green-leaning shoppers move away from cheap protein, has all combined to dramatically

increase demand for nuts of all varieties. The volume of hazelnuts (of which cobnuts are a cultivar) that were imported into the UK between 2007 and 2014 rose by a staggering 1,547%. And that's just one nut.

"You can't go into a shop anywhere these days without seeing little snacking pots of nuts at the tills," says Hunt. "The point is – consumption of the raw product is way up."

But UK growers' share of the market is miniscule. Of the 250 or so members of the Kentish Cobnuts Association, just 20 farm hazelnuts on a commercial scale, with a combined area of 600 acres and an estimated value of just under £1 million. Commercial walnut production is so small, it doesn't even register.

Kernel of truth: walnuts have huge potential



So, Hunt's mission is now even more ambitious – to restore the UK's nut growing industry. And he's finding there's keen interest, particularly among larger investors with long-term, post-Brexit plans to help him do just that.

"Here at Potash Farm, we have seven acres of cobnuts – it's the largest commercial plantation, but you could easily plant a 10 acre block and I have one or two estates considering it," says Hunt, who offers advice through his specialist consultancy, The Walnut Tree Company, also based at St Mary's Platt in Kent.

With establishment costs of roughly £8,000/hectare for cobnuts and £5,000 - £6,000/hectare for walnuts, depending on density, those estates can expect to shell out up to £100,000, including infrastructure. But ongoing input costs are low and the payback will last for generations, which appeals to the more traditional owners, while new city money is intrigued by the idea of a trail-blazing cash crop.

"They are all looking for alternative sources of income and most nuts will deal with a variety of soil types," says Hunt. "The drier and warmer the climate the better – you especially don't want the trees to be constantly wet during the pollination season of January to March. That said,

there's a very successful 20-acre plantation in Liskeard in Cornwall, which isn't known for its dry springs. Other than that, the trees are pretty hardy and virtually pest free."

So why don't we grow more of them? It might not be a coincidence that large-scale nut production, which was a feature of the British countryside right up until the first decades of the 20th century, declined dramatically following the introduction of the grey squirrel in the 1870s. They remain public enemy number one.

"It's always a race between them and us at the start of the picking season," says Hunt. "And vermin control is the first thing I talk about to potential growers. If you do not have good control you can lose half the crop."

"The UK was a significant nut producer in Victorian times and right up to middle of last century," he continues. "Where I am in Kent, there were 2,000 acres of cobnuts grown between two parishes alone. The Victorians started putting them on their table to be eaten with fruits from the empire and port after a meal. But they also had a huge industrial usage. The textile industry used the nuts to fix dyes and large quantities were transported from Kent to mills in the north of England. The camouflage uniform worn by soldiers right up to the Second World War owed its green colour to cobnuts."

But once the plantations disappeared the idea that Britain could not grow commercial quantities of nuts was quickly mythologised and, much like the English wine industry, the closing years of the 20th century saw it represented by just a handful of dedicated growers – most, such as longstanding cobnut producers the Maynard and Cannon families, in Kent.

Now, with British agriculture entering a new era, a decade of currency fluctuations on the horizon and agricultural margins under pressure, nuts as a crop are coming

Making the case for nuts: Grower and consultant Alexander Hunt



back into fashion and even attracting foreign investment.

"We are currently representing a family of Indian industrialists who are already big strawberry, asparagus and grape growers in the Punjab, who are looking for the right site for walnuts and cobnuts in the UK," says Hunt. "They see a good opportunity here to access the market in northern Europe."

He believes there's no reason why we should not grow almonds and sweet chestnuts, too because, with worldwide production struggling to keep pace with demand, the price of UK-grown nuts sold on to domestic market suddenly looks very competitive indeed, despite the low volume.

"Last year, imported nuts were selling at around £12-£14/kilo and we were selling cobnuts cheaper than that," says Hunt.

Rich pickings: UK yields are comparable to European ones



They score highly on conservation, provenance and ethical production, too – three issues currently giving global producers grief as they struggle to bring transparency into the supply chain. But Hunt would welcome a breed improvement programme.

"There have been some exciting developments on the walnut side, particularly two Czech varieties called Saturn and Mars that have been developed for extremes of temperature, but nothing on the cobnut side. A heavier cropping Kent Cob would be very welcome."

That said, UK cobnuts yield a very respectable 2.5t/acre, comparable to Turkish filberts, which by and large are grown by very small producers who collectively make up one of the biggest hazelnut producing nations. It gives Hunt faith in the UK's potential, but he'll have to be patient. It takes seven years for a cobnut tree to come into full fruit; slightly longer for walnuts. So rebalancing the UK's trade deficit in nuts might yet be some way off.

Ever the optimist, Hunt does believe their time will come.

"Once you get into the September crop, of course, then you're picking nuts that will both last and travel well," he says. "If you cannot supply the UK demand, my view has been, let's not export them, but I do think there will be opportunities there in future."

+ For more details about cobnuts see: www.kentishcobnuts.com and for information about consultancy matters see: www.walnuttrees.co.uk or call 01732 882734.