

Asparagus sectors pushes to **extend** standard lengths

A new European standard for the marketing length of asparagus is currently being discussed by German and French delegations.

BY CLARA BERNAUD



The discussions, initiated in Germany, focused on proposals to change European standards regulating the harvesting length of CAT I and II asparagus, extending the dimensions from 22 cm to 24 cm

An informal meeting was held by representatives of German asparagus producer unions (North, South and East) and the French asparagus producers union during the Interaspa 2023 trade fair in Sandhatten, Germany at the beginning of September. The discussions, initiated in Germany, focused on proposals to change European standards regulating the harvesting length of CAT I and II asparagus, extending the dimensions from 22 cm to 24 cm.

An economically beneficial standard

The proposed new standard would enable a higher volume of marketed product without changing the quantity of inputs (plastic, pesticides, fertilisers, water, etc.). This would provide economic benefits to asparagus producers, through greater yield per hectare for unchanged production costs (particularly in terms of labour). The measure would not impact product quality because modern cultivation techniques with high mounds and new varieties are

already being developed. In addition, it would allow waste reduction in the field, an argument that should also appeal to Brussels. The proposed new standard would simply be added to previous ones, with no obligation on producers to follow it. Everyone would remain free to continue to sell 22 cm asparagus instead of 24 cm. This would provide plenty of time for adapting labels, while also allowing producers that prefer not to make the calibre change to highlight their traditions. For its part, the French industry seems divided on the subject, with delegates expressing fears (poorly substantiated) concerning the risk of fibrosity in the last two centimetres of the spear and lower taste quality.

The exchanges prompted a desire for a broader sharing of information between Germany and France, as well as with other producing countries in Europe. The coordination work could continue during ExpoSE in Karlsruhe in November, with an official meeting between Italian, Spanish and Greek authorities.



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22-23 November 2023 at the Karlsruhe Trade Fair Centre

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expoSE is Europe's leading trade fair for asparagus and berry production, where more than 400 exhibitors await you.

BY GUY DUBON

From November 22 to 23, the Karlsruhe Trade Fair Centre will host the 27th edition of expoSE (Europe's leading trade fair for asparagus and berry production) and the 12th edition of expoDirekt (Germany's largest trade fair for agricultural direct marketing), with 6,000 trade visitors and more than 400 exhibitors from 11 nations expected. Get yourself in the game early to reap maximum benefit from these world-class events.

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The dual trade fair is organised by the Association of South German Asparagus and Strawberry Growers e.V., which works in close contact with growers and



More than 400 exhibitors are expecting 6,000 professional visitors at expoSE on 22-23 November 2023 in Karlsruhe.

is fully versed about all issues facing the industry. Germany has over 25,000 ha of asparagus and over 16,000 ha of strawberries, worth an annual turnover of €1.4 billion.

For the 1st time within the scope of expoSE: the Berry Technology Forum

The Berry Technology Forum (Beerentechnikforum) will take place for the first time at the expoSE trade fair at the trade fair conference centre on Thursday 23 November 2023, starting at 10 a.m. Selected companies will focus on expertise and products. The aim of the series of lectures is to meet the increasing demand for technology in berry cultivation. Different production areas will be highlighted and technologies will be presented that are already on the market. Topics include the reduction of water consumption, oxygen enrichment in irrigation water, improvement of the climate and space utilisation in protected cultivation, the effect of UV light in production and in post-harvest treatment, and the use of solar panels for energy production and indoor farming.

34th Asparagus Day on the 1st day of the trade fair

On Wednesday 22 November 2023, Asperge d'Alsace, the Association of Alsatian Asparagus Growers, will present its activities as part of Asparagus Day (Spargeltag) in the conference hall of the trade fair conference centre. The main topics on Asparagus Day include the minimum wage in a European comparison, paying special attention to the situation in the neighbouring countries of France and Austria, as well as the retention of good employees to companies. One group of topics will deal with the effective use of water in asparagus cultivation, with technical solutions for controlling soil moisture and initial experiences with irrigation adapted by sensors. Finally, a presentation will show a comparison of the yield potential of press potted plants and soil-press stuffing plants and crown plants in asparagus cultivation.



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Interaspa reflects **gloomy** German asparagus campaign

The German asparagus market lacks dynamism, leaving the sector with concerns about the future.

BY CLARA BERNAUD



The German asparagus market, for its part, is a price-driven market.

Attendance at Interaspa, a show dedicated to asparagus and berries in Sandhatten in Germany, is in sharp decline. Show director Fred Eickhorst said that this is the case with many agricultural events in the region. The sector is doing poorly, continuing the downward trend from the previous season, with a deflated market amidst spiralling production costs. Labour in particular represents a significant burden for German producers while the minimum wage continues to increase in the country. Bank interest rates are also rising, making it more difficult to invest to renew crops

on German farms. In addition, producers are also encountering difficulties in handing down their activity to younger generations along the Rhine. So, the climate is far from calm, given all the uncertainties concerning the future of the German sector.

French campaign in sharp contrast to its neighbour's

The 2023 German campaign saw volumes drop slightly, in line with the trend from the previous campaign, with stable prices, although price disparities were observed in different German regions. The climate remains gloomy for German producers walking the show's aisles. By contrast, the French 2023 asparagus campaign went well, despite average sale prices over the season being identical to those registered in 2022 and production costs jumping again (+15%). However, French production is in currently going through a different phase from German production. The French asparagus sector is now stable after a period of drastic decline in surface area, and benefits from a dynamic domestic market. The German asparagus market, for its part, is a price-driven market. Experts from the sector advocate educating German consumers so that the share of household income allocated to food will rise from its current level in Germany of only 11% to closer to the 14% it is in France (Sources: Eurostat 2018; INSEE 2021).



The climate remains gloomy for German producers walking the show's aisles.



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Against **dieback**, unity is strength

A better understanding of the development of mycorrhizae and its impact on asparagus is the first step towards finding solutions against asparagus dieback.

BY MAURANE PAGNIEZ, INVENIO/PÔLE ASPERGE.



Different methods of installing mycorrhizae are tested in pallox at the Asparagus center of Invenio.

The phenomenon of asparagus plantation dieback concerns all production areas in France, with variations depending on the year and climatic conditions. “In Maine-et-Loire, Landes or Gard, the mortality rate of shoots in vegetation is estimated at 10 to 20% on asparagus plantations over 8 years old. And yield losses can reach 30%,” said Maurane Pagniez of Invenio Asparagus Pole (a French experimentation centre). Phytophthoras, fusariums and purple rhizoctonia are the main causes and mycorrhization could limit or even resist these pathogens.

Promote the establishment of mycorrhizae

To avoid contamination of asparagus fields, crowns are often disinfected and treated before planting. “But this operation has the effect of destroying the endogenous mycorrhizae normally present on the crowns and making the young plants more sensitive to soil pathogens,” said Pagniez. The objective of a study by Invenio called Mycado is to evaluate the potential positive effects of the establishment of mycorrhizae. The project also aims to identify whether these mycorrhizae, once installed, have an impact on plant vigour. These tests involve

comparing several strategies for promoting the establishment of mycorrhizae. “First of all, it is possible to wait for these mycorrhizae to settle without outside help, since it is a natural phenomenon,” said Pagniez. A second strategy is to employ «commercial solutions» for bringing these fungi. A third way is to obtain plants whereby nursery workers directly introduce mycorrhizae. The last strategy requires an intermediate step of relaying plants so as to multiply mycorrhizae, either by natural or commercial means, then incorporating this soil into the growing medium.

Impact on dieback

“After a year of culture in pallox, mycorrhizae became established via all modalities, including the control modality; that is to say, the one containing just the soil of a plot on which an absence of mycorrhization had been noted,” said Pagniez. In response to the other strategies, results will vary depending on whether the focus is on mycorrhization or on asparagus biomass. “The trial, which was set up in 2021, must be monitored over time with disease inoculations if necessary to ultimately validate the impact of mycorrhizae on resistance to dieback,” said Pagniez.



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Could the Dutch be **convinced** to eat even more asparagus?

It's already in the world's top 5 for per capita asparagus consumption, but the Netherlands aims to boost domestic sales of the popular vegetable despite a decline in its production in the last 5 years.

BY JULIE BUTLER [@FreshScribe](#)



Dutch market at an average of about 900 g per person.

The Dutch have long held a fondness for asparagus, with each person estimated to eat nearly 1 kg each year. And they are also known for growing high quality asparagus, which is mainly used to supply the domestic market but also exported to other parts of Europe and beyond. However, the planted area and annual production volume of 'white gold' in the Netherlands have been declining since 2018. At the International Asparagus Meeting, held as part of the asparagus and berry show, ExpoSE in Karlsruhe, Germany, on November 23, 2022, Teboza owner Will Teeuwen, a 3rd generation asparagus grower, sketched out the current context and the outlook for the Dutch sector.

Further concentration foreseen for Dutch asparagus production

The number of Dutch asparagus growers and the planted area has declined since 2018. The number of growers in 2014 was 800 but had dropped to 700 by 2018 and in 2021 stood at 500, while the planted area has gone from 2,800 almost a decade ago to 3,400 in 2018 and 2,900 in 2021. On average, there's currently about 6 ha per grower and a net yield of

about 6,000-7,000 kg/ha. "I think now we are in a kind of stable situation and the number of growers will still go down but the number of hectares will stay on this level," Teeuwen said. Dutch production is concentrated in the country's south, "which has something to do with the sandy soil but also with a bit more of a microclimate there, with warmer temperatures in spring." Teboza is located in Limburg, which delivers 63% of production, with a further 33% in North Brabant and 4% dotted around other parts of Holland.

DUTCH ASPARAGUS PRODUCTION

	Growers	Surface	Production
2014	800	2800 ha	16 000 t
2018	700	3400 ha	21000 t
2021	500	2900 ha	18 000 t
2022	488	2761 ha	16 500 t
Change 2021-22	-2%	-5%	-8%
Change 2018-22	-30%	-19%	-21%

Source: Will Teeuwen, Teboza

Overall consumption growth stalling, but green gaining traction

Teeuwen said fresh asparagus consumption is more or less stable in the Dutch market at an average of about 900 g per person, "which we think is quite good." Twenty years ago, it was 200-300 g, "so we did a good job in those 20 years but in the last 5-6 years it has more or less been stable, so there's a challenge to increase consumption," he said. White currently accounts for 88% of asparagus sales in the Netherlands, green 11% and purple under 1%. But the influence of green asparagus is increasing, "not very fast, but it's increasing

DUTCH ASPARAGUS CONSUMPTION

2014	0,75 kg per capita
2018	0,88 kg per capita
2021	0,9 kg per capita

Source: Will Teeuwen, Teboza

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The number of Dutch asparagus growers and the planted area has declined since 2018.

and I think it's mainly because the younger people are focused more on the green asparagus but also people from abroad, and there's quite a lot in the Netherlands, are also more into the green."

Accommodation the biggest workforce challenge

Teeuwen said that in 2023, the minimum hourly wage in the Netherlands is €11.75 gross (up from €10.24 in 2021), which after taxes puts about €9.50 net in an employee's pocket. But the employer cost is actually €17.63 per hour, which includes payments such as for social security and pension plans for the seasonal workers. "I always thought we had the most expensive salaries in the world but then I saw that Canada is doing quite a good job on that one also," he quipped. Teboza's harvest workers mainly come from Romania. It still has some coming from Greece, but these numbers



are decreasing. "The biggest challenge we have at the moment in Holland is not getting the people, by being a good employer we get them, but we also have to house them," he said.

Successful robot harvesting probably still 3-4 years away

Teboza has been doing a lot of tests with robotic harvest machines, including in its fields last year. "Unfortunately, the first one (Cerescon's Sparter) went bankrupt in the middle of the season and that caused us a big challenge because we had to take out this machine somewhere in April. The other one (from AVL Motion), is still going on but I think we still need some more time before these machines will be suitable for harvesting asparagus on a large scale," Teeuwen said.

Rising costs also a major headache

"The biggest challenge we have in the business, not only us as an asparagus grower but as a business in general, is how we can cope with increasing costs," he went on to say. "We are constantly trying to innovate in our company." In addition, Teboza is saving a lot of money on packing materials, which is good both for sustainability and reducing costs. Teeuwen said it is focusing a lot on decreasing packing materials but in the meantime, retail customers are still showing high demand for packed asparagus, "so although we decreased our use of the packaging material significantly we are packing more asparagus," he said.

HARVEST WORKER WAGES		
	Minimum wage	Employer cost (inc. social security, etc.)
2021	10,24 €/h	15,36 €/h
2022	10,48 €/h	15,71 €/h
2023	11,75 €/h	17,63 €/h
Rise 2021-23	+15 %	+15 %

Source: Will Teeuwen, Teboza

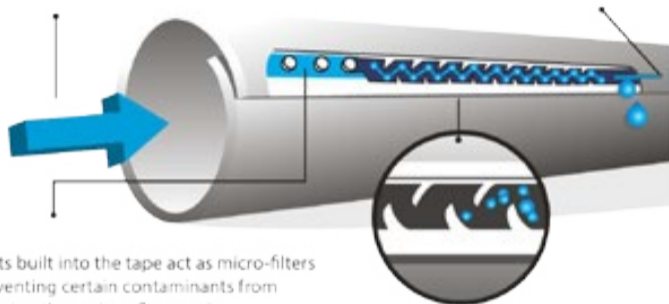
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Brits **cut back** on asparagus as inflation continues to bite

Higher prices have seen UK shoppers rein in their spend on asparagus by £1.85 million in the last 12 months.

BY JULIE BUTLER [@FreshScribe](#)

With prices still highly inflated, the volume and value of asparagus sold in Great Britain continues its descent. The 8,365 tons sold at retail in the last 12 months is 6.8% lower than the previous year's total. In comparison, the wider vegetable market declined by just 2.1% and the full fresh produce market by 2.8% over the same period. The average price per kilo of asparagus rose nearly 5% to £9.28 over the 52 weeks to September 3 and caused penetration to fall for several months, dropping nearly 6% since a year ago to 26.5% of British households. However, this downward trend appears to be softening, Kantar says.

Brits swapping out asparagus for staples like potatoes

Kantar data also shows the price inflation has affected purchase frequency, which has slipped 3.2% to just under 5.3 times a year. The shopper behaviour expert says there's a clear correlation between this inflation and consumers exiting the category. Asparagus shoppers appear to be continuing to switch to more staple items such as potatoes and



The average price per kilo of asparagus rose nearly 5% to £9.28 during the last season.

carrots. Existing shoppers are also buying less this year compared to last year (the volume per buyer is -1.9% to 1.1 kg for the latest 12 months), likely linked to the drop in frequency for asparagus purchases. However, trip volume has re-entered growth in the last couple of months (+1.4% to 210 g), meaning shoppers are now putting a bit more asparagus in their basket. "An increase in volume sold on 'Y for £X' deals has likely helped push trip volume back into growth," Kantar said. "We are seeing across grocery that promotional levels are creeping up and it looks like this is happening within asparagus too," it added. Overall, the spend on fresh asparagus at retail in Britain was down 2.3% year-on-year to about £77.6 million for the 52 weeks ending on September 3, 2023, a decline driven by fewer shoppers and fewer trips.

Fine asparagus has driven growth in trip volume

Spears account for the biggest share of asparagus sales in the UK, delivering 57% of the value and 70% of the volume sold at retail, followed by tips with 41% and 28% respectively and fine asparagus accounting for the about 3% remainder in both cases. Kantar reports all three of these asparagus sub-categories are seeing penetration decline.



6.5% of British households eat asparagus. However, this downward trend appears to be softening.



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New Zealand: how much nitrogen does asparagus need?

With consumers demanding more sustainable farming, and the prospect of New Zealand growing more asparagus once robotic harvesters come into commercial use, researchers have been exploring nitrates use in the country's asparagus sector.

BY JULIE BUTLER [@FreshScribe](#)



Experts say nitrogen fertiliser should be applied in the establishing years for asparagus, but thereafter, only the nitrogen removed during harvest needs to be replaced. Anecdotally, asparagus has been considered a low nitrogen crop, but grower practices in New Zealand don't always reflect this. For example, a 2019 survey of grower practice in Waikato suggested an extremely wide range of application rates with typical applications exceeding crop exports.

Lack of nitrates guidelines specific to NZ asparagus crops

A few years ago, LandWISE, an organisation promoting sustainable land management, worked with vegetable growers in Levin amid concerns they were losing nitrogen to Lake Horowhenua. It developed a simple nutrient budget template that suits most crops. But when LandWISE manager Dan Bloomer heard asparagus growers were also keen to use it, he realised no reliable data or guidelines were available for their green asparagus. Thus, after talks with the NZ Asparagus

Council, and funding via the Rural Professionals Fund from NZ's Our Land and Water National Science Challenge, a nitrate management trial started.

Some farmers replace a lot more nitrogen than is removed at harvest

Unfortunately grower input was limited by a Covid-19 lockdown and brutal season in 2021, but despite the difficulties, some insights were gained. So far, a wide range of nitrogen management practices have been identified, indicating no agreed industry best practice. Bloomer said grower comments varied

ABOUT NZ ASPARAGUS

Harvest season usually **Sept-Dec**.
 Average crop **2200 tons**, but <1,650 tons in 2020 & 2021 (Faostat)
Exports in 2022: val. \$ **110,853**, vol. **17,6 tons** (Comtrade)
Imports in 2022: val. \$ **133,753**, vol. **12,4 tons** (Comtrade)



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Roots were sifted from the soil samples using a 5mm sieve, and sent to laboratory for washing and analysis.

from, "I don't put any nitrogen on my asparagus, I save it up and put it on my broccoli", through to putting it on "because Dad did". "So there isn't an industry standard practice," he said. Some farmers were found to be applying nitrogen at rates much higher than were likely being exported in the harvested crop. The researchers estimated that the amount of NO₃-N exported in the harvested crop is about 12-13 kg NO₃-N/ha while rates of 24, 55 and 69 kg NO₃-N/ha were used by those growers in the trial who reported applying nitrogen fertilisers.

Sources

1. Project report: Collaborative Research Towards Best Practice Nitrogen Management in Asparagus Cropping: Final report. Read the report here: <https://ourlandandwater.nz/outputs/collaborative-research-towards-best-practice-nitrogen-management-in-asparagus-cropping-final-report/>
2. How Much Nitrogen Does Asparagus Need? <https://ourlandandwater.nz/news/how-much-nitrogen-does-asparagus-need/>

Nitrogen storage cycle in asparagus

The NZ project analysis found the roots accounted for 62.8% of all NO₃-N in the system in spring, 64.2% in summer and 80.5% in winter. The root contribution at the start of the spear harvest is expected to mirror the end of winter levels.

General recommendations for nitrogen fertiliser use for asparagus



Sufficient nitrogen fertiliser to grow healthy fern should be applied during the establishing years but once established, application, if any, should be based on replacing nutrients removed during harvest. Research shows 75 kg-N/ha could support a crop for three years without a detectable change in fern nitrogen concentration. Fertiliser should be applied at the start of fern growth, which is when uptake occurs. This minimises leaching risk, especially on shallow or low water holding soil types. Source: LandWISE report

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