

Louth potato growers have it in the bag

These potato growers have found their niche

Shane Kennedy
Teagasc tillage advisor, Drogheda

Volatile prices, smaller margins, tighter specifications and rising costs are increasing the pressure on potato growers. Supermarkets, who sell three-quarters of all potatoes consumed here, are supplied by a small number of very large growers with the scale to cover the huge investment in machinery, production and storage. However, there are still a small number of farmers who are running more traditional mixed farming operations while also successfully growing and marketing potatoes.

Nicholas and Martin Halpenny, who farm near Stabannon, Co Louth, operate a good example of a family business which is serving local consumers. Through careful agronomy, they have established a reputation for Rooster potatoes with both a good appearance and high eating quality.

Towards the end of May, the brothers are to be found quietly working together, changing over to row-crop tyres as they prepare to spray winter wheat, winter and spring oats. Winter barley has already received its final spray. "We sow late compared to growers further south but we find that it suits us in terms of yield and quality," says Nicholas.

With the potatoes in the ground, the brothers are on top of things with some cattle nearly ready to sell and the silage not due to be cut for another week or 10 days. One of the brothers is never far from the packing shed where they wash, dry and grade their stored crop. If they get an unexpected order, they will fill it. But they don't sell potatoes in bulk boxes.

"We found the box-trade to be uncertain and volatile," says Nicholas. "So we gradually built up a network of small retailers and distributors in our

area who buy directly from us." This strategy has been so successful that every potato leaves the yard in a 5kg or 10kg bag.

Soil and fertility are key

Nicholas is a great believer in getting the basics right. "Our land and ground we rent is generally clay-loam and we really appreciate the value of soil testing as we need both pH and soil fertility to be right."

Some potash (K) deficiencies on tillage land were addressed this year by switching to a 10-7-25 fertiliser compound. Nicholas never operates a rotation of less than five years for potatoes. The fertiliser choice of 12 bags of 7-6-17 also helps him to achieve the optimum dry-matter levels for eating quality but also for storage.

All of his potato seed is certified. "We place great emphasis on good-quality, virus-free seed to provide the early vigour and skin finish required for a packing sample," says Nicholas. The brothers operate one ambient and one refrigerated store, allowing them to provide an excellent sample of ware potatoes year round.

Machinery

"We like to keep costs as low as possible, without threatening quality," says Nicholas. The brothers carry out all potato-planting operations themselves. They have tillage farmers' fascination with machinery and the ingenuity to solve almost any mechanical problem in-house.

An interesting example of this is visible at planting time where Nicholas and Martin use a small elevator, which the loose seed potatoes are tipped into from an old grain trailer recently refurbished for the purpose. This eliminates the need for a tel-handler and perhaps an additional labour unit in the field. It also allows for the safe and efficient transfer of seed into the planter.

Their machinery costs are relatively low and Nicholas jokes that this is because they have decided not to overly invest in this area in recent years



QUALITY

"The Halpennys have established a reputation for the appearance and eating quality of their potatoes," says Shane Kennedy. "That comes down to the ground they use to grow the potatoes, the fertiliser and pest management regimes, and in particular the handling and storage of the potatoes."



Shane Kennedy and Nicholas Halpenny.

because they may not be around for much longer!

More likely, it's testament to the brothers' skill in the farm workshop, repairing and maintaining equipment and the "getting the basics right" philosophy, which permeates their approach.

The brothers, consciously or unconsciously, close the loop on their farming enterprise as much as possible and the traditional mixed farming operation tends to lend a hand in this. They use the potatoes that don't make the grade for fattening cattle along with various cereals grains that they grow and roll themselves.

Farmyard manure

The farmyard manure that these cattle produce is then stored indoors for as long as possible to preserve its nutrient status and is then spread on the land to improve soil fertility and reduce fertiliser costs. All of the land they farm is within a 2km radius of their yard.

The fact that Nicholas and Martin never have any problem renting good, fresh potato ground is testament to their reputation and good neighbourly qualities – they can be relied upon for tending to the stock of neighbouring farmers when they are on holiday.

It is also a truly family affair whereby Nicholas can draw on his children and extended family for help during busy periods as most of them also live within a few kilometres of the farmyard. His wife Anne looks after the paperwork.

EU visionaries like to talk about optimum food production models. This is where high-quality locally grown and consumed food is produced at a competitive cost and where waste streams are integrated back into a production system which is both economically and environmentally sustainable. It sounds very like what the Halpennys have been doing for years.

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In total just 9,000ha of potatoes are now grown annually in Ireland. It is an area which is declining as consumption and the pressure of imports takes its toll on Irish growers