



FIELD VEGETABLE PRODUCTION

Background

Vegetable production in Ireland is an important part of the horticultural industry, with approximately 4,237ha of field vegetables grown annually worth €76m (DAFM, 2018) at farm gate. In addition, there are 163ha of vegetables grown under protection valued at close on €29m. Production is concentrated in Dublin, Meath, Wexford and Cork, with approximately 200 growers. The largest 50 growers (in terms of area) account for 75% of the total field vegetable production area. The industry is labour intensive, employing in excess of 1,000 people full-time. These large-scale production units are highly professional and efficient, focused on producing high-quality vegetables at a competitive price for supermarkets. Ireland is about 60% self-sufficient in vegetables, and our seasonal climate means that the remainder must be imported. While a significant amount is imported out of season, there is still an



Swedes growing under fleece cover helps in continuity of supply.

opportunity for Irish growers to substitute some of these imports. However, entering the vegetable market at scale is very expensive. The size of the market should

be considered very carefully, as an over-supply of vegetable produce will significantly reduce the price and have a negative impact on the sector.

Where is suitable?

Vegetables can be grown on most soil types (light, medium or heavy) provided they are well drained. South-facing sites that allow maximum

sunlight are the best, though not essential; however, exposed or windy sites should be avoided if possible. Growing vegetables close to populated

areas is advantageous as an increased number of markets and consumer bases are usually available, and logistics are simplified.

Opportunities in small-scale production

Bord Bia's 'Dietary Lifestyles Report' in 2018 reported that people – particularly young people – are placing more emphasis on plant-based diets. The change in dietary trends of Irish consumers and increased recognition of the health benefits of consuming vegetables, represents an opportunity for vegetable producers, whether large scale or small scale. While over 90% of Irish vegetables are sold through supermarkets at very competitive prices, there is still a place for small-scale operators supplying locally to markets, food service outlets, selling at the farm gate, or other direct local-produce supply schemes. The idea of being able to source food locally and directly from the producer is for many a refreshing and satisfying way to shop, as well as a way of directly supporting the local economy and supply base. Local markets also have a role to play in food tourism, with food trails now becoming more commonplace around Ireland. In recent years, there has been a slight resurgence in small-scale vegetable growers who have identified a niche or local demand for a product and often, they are able to command a premium price, as locally grown produce is perceived to be fresher and of higher quality. Some growers have identified a niche market supplying organic vegetables to their local area. Organic vegetable production is an option for growers seeking a premium price for their



More people are interested in plant-based diets than ever before.

produce. However, this production system is generally labour intensive and requires a high standard of IPM. From the perspective of the small food producer, farmers' markets (as well as box schemes and farm shops) offer a number of advantages as a route to market. The supply chain is shorter and there is a more informal approach to marketing. Transport requirements are generally far simpler than the more conventional routes to market, and in many cases there are no intermediaries involved. The shorter supply chain also allows the producer to remain in direct control of the product. Bord Bia offers themed training workshops for producers supplying farmers' markets. These can help producers to explore opportunities and make contacts. Therefore, having carefully considered and researched a market, with some careful planning it is possible to grow a range of vegetables, some as potential niche products for local sale.

Supports Available

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Commercial Horticulture Sector provides grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment in the horticulture sector.

This is a competitive scheme and applications for grant aid are submitted annually to the DAFM. A minimum investment of €10,000 applies to be eligible for aid.

Further information

For further information please contact
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The following resources are also helpful:

- 🌐 www.teagasc.ie/crops/horticulture/vegetables/vegetable-publications/
- 🌐 www.teagasc.ie/publications/2017/a-guide-to-vegetable-growing--8th-edition.php
- 🌐 www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/horticultureschemes/

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Regulations and quality assurance

The sector is highly regulated. All producers must be registered with the DAFM and comply with European Union food safety regulations. Consumers and retailers demand produce that has been grown, handled, packaged and transported to the highest standards of quality and hygiene, in a clean and sustainable manner. The Bord Bia Sustainable Horticulture Assurance Scheme (SHAS) has been developed as a means to prove to customers that growers are meeting these demands. The requirements of the SHAS are based on current legislation, relevant industry guidelines, international standards and established best practice. This Scheme is optional but participation is required for growers who are supplying multiples. Producers who participate in the SHAS must abide by the requirements of it, which cover issues such as:

- food safety;
- product quality;
- traceability;
- environmental protection;
- staff welfare;
- resource efficiency; and,
- social sustainability.

Given that labour is a major cost, the adoption of new technology and machinery for labour saving is critical to the sector staying competitive. Crop management and production protocols incorporating Integrated Pest Management (IPM) strategies in the context of reduced pesticides, and new regulations to meet the standards set out in quality assurance schemes are also key.