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Case Study: Royalcress, Jerez, Spain



Positioned south west of the Grazalema National Park, Spain making use of a combination of light, abundant clean spring water and a cool Atlantic breeze, provides a perfect microclimate for watercress production. The Grazalema area sees the highest rainfall in Spain; water that eventually flows through impermeable gravel lined beds at Royalcress allowing production to continue almost all year.

Since its start in 1986, sustained increases in demand for watercress has meant that Royalcress expanded both in 1994 with the purchase of the Finca Fui site (which is now the Spanish logistics hub) and Rocio in 2001. This increased production to 20 hectares with capacity at their peak of up to 40 tonnes of watercress a week. In 2016, Royalcress celebrated its 30 year anniversary. As well as producing watercress and other salad leaves, it also provides seed for the sister companies of the Watercress Company based in the US and the UK, in this way linking production in Dorset, Hampshire and Florida.

RoyalCress is accredited by GlobalGap, Tesco Nurture, Marks and Spencer Field to Fork and LEAF Marque. In 2001, Royalcress became Spain's first producer of certified organic watercress. Recognised by their peers in the Spanish Watercress Growers Association for their work in pioneering new bio-controls, they are committed to the long-term development of measures to protect the crop.



Royalcross first became LEAF Marque certified in 2005 and quickly found that LEAF Marque was complementary to the company's general drive for efficiency. Damien Lascelles, the Technical and Production Manager, said:

“With the introduction of variable speed control on our recirculation pumps (which keeps water recirculating through our beds), we have managed to make large savings on electrical consumption.”

A focus on Integrated Pest Management

As LEAF Marque became embedded, it became part of two focal points for the production – IPM and biodiversity. Part of the integration in pest management was a move away from “just pushing chemicals” to a greater focus on detail and communication:

“LEAF Marque has strengthened our focus on Integrated Pest Management involving sound crop monitoring methods from the use of pheromone traps to crop inspections, pest and disease thresholds. EU review of activities has reduced the number of PPP's [Plant Protection Products] available on minor crops such as watercress whilst more bio-pesticides are becoming available.”

This focus on IPM, in turn, has changed staff training and levels of engagement:

“It is not just a policy; there is a lot more discussion. This has an impact on staff training. Staff supervisors crop walk twice a week. Crop workers are trained to look for pests and diseases as well as deficiencies – it is about involving staff, the people working in the crop are the people seeing changes that could lead to a bigger problem. Luckily, we have a good group of core staff, we retain the same staff every year, who have built up expertise, and we have had a stable team for 10-15 years now.”

Another part of this integrated focus is recognising the importance of biodiversity. Royalcross have left 5% of the farm uncultivated and also incorporated field margin strips:

“We see a fair number of bats and have set up bat boxes on the office, but no bats are residents yet. In terms of field margins, we see signs of beneficial insects in the margins, the diversity of plants increased over the years - snakes generally in areas where there is little activity, and we leave those alone as they are predating on rodents.”

Community engagement

The Open Farm Sunday initiative has attracted local people to the farm. Drawn by the opportunity to walk the farm, a BBQ and Flamenco band, Damien says that has been helpful as “there isn’t much vegetable production in this part of Spain and locals find it very interesting to see what we are achieving”. This initiative has improved local understanding of what the business is doing and general goodwill. One group of residents are particularly, pleased,

“Excess crop? It is either sent to local food bank or the local zoo, we are members of the local zoo, and apparently, it is a favourite of the hippos.”