Growing Wales' horticulture sector through innovation

Policy Brief Autumn 2026

SUMMARY

This participatory action research was focused on co-designing practical interventions that could be trialled to support and economically reward nature-friendly horticulture in Wales. Two workshops were held with approximately 35 participants at each; participants were chosen for their knowledge and experience of the sector. The group explored the current status of horticulture in Wales, its future potential, as well as economic, logistic and policy supports and barriers to its further development. The group developed a series of proposals which have the potential to both improve the economic viability of horticultural production in Wales, as well as address wider socioeconomic challenges including dietary- caused Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD), sustainable transitions to net zero, land use diversification and the logistical challenges that horticulturalists face in accessing markets. As a result of these workshops and the proposals generated by participants, we make the following recommendations:

- Expand access to affordable land and housing for horticulturalists
- Invest in infrastructure, logistical support and transport of horticultural produce to markets
- Integrate and expand accessible training for new and current horticulturalists
- Develop regional markets for horticulture that also address public health and dietary NCDs

BACKGROUND

Study Objectives

This study is part of wider work by Cymru Wledig LPIP Rural Wales on supporting the transition to Net Zero. It explores the current status of the edible horticulture sector in Wales and recommends proposals for how to support and develop this sector.

Policy Context

Agriculture in Wales both contributes to, and is impacted by, GHGe emissions. The horticultural sector has gained prominence in recent years both as a stand-alone part of Wales's land use strategy, and its past and future position within mixed farming systems. The recent publication of Wales's Community Food Strategy, coupled with the new Sustainable Farming Scheme and updated rules on public procurement, all highlight the importance of horticulture. This presents opportunities for stakeholders to take informed action and make progress on these recent developments in Welsh policy and its recognition of the importance of horticulture.

The Evidence Base

Cymru Wledig LPIP Rural Wales ran a series of workshops on supporting and rewarding horticulture as part of its Innovation Labs. These labs coproduced innovative proposals to support the development of a wellbeing economy in Wales. The horticulture labs brought together a group of 35 people, representing growers, educators, local food partnerships, campaigning groups, local authorities and food system researchers for a series of two full-day workshops in June & July of 2025. These explored the current status of horticulture in Wales, and then codesigned desired futures for the sector, and possible interventions that could lead to these transitions. The workshops also generated a significant range of other suggestions from key stakeholders around how to drive improvements in the sector.

KEY FINDINGS

More land needed for both horticultural production and housing for producers

Workshop participants stressed the importance of new and current growers having access to affordable land for both housing and horticultural businesses. It is imperative that people can live near where they work. There was great concern about the current trend for local authorities to sell off council-owned farms. In contrast, there was enthusiastic support for innovative examples of best practice, such as Bremenda Isaf in Carmarthenshire, and Powys' Future Farms project at Sarn. Both of these schemes support local economic development as well as improved access to locally grown agroecological horticultural produce.

Growers need improved support to access regional markets

The lack of access to secure, economically viable markets is a significant barrier to both new entrants to the horticultural sector, and to those current businesses who could otherwise be encouraged to scale up production and expand their businesses. While there has been significant growth in online hubs which increase sales opportunities for small-scale growers, many felt that this market was relatively saturated, and difficult to maintain economic viability. There are physical markets which could provide viable sales opportunities for producers, as well as increase access to healthy food for consumers, however, infrastructure and transport remain significant obstacles. This also includes strengthened infrastructure and economic links with other food systems businesses, such as the hospitality sector.

Improve quality of, and access to skills and training

There is currently a disconnect between the different educational stages, most notably FE and HE, and CPD for people already working in the sector. Horticulture, and education around the wider food system, is not prioritised in the curriculum, and therefore fails to inspire and engage potential growers at all stages of their education. Training opportunities are disparate and there is no central coordinating body which facilitates new entrants gaining both the horticultural and business skills they require to successfully enter the sector. The sector is not promoted as a career opportunity for people to aspire to and cumulatively acquire the necessary inspiration and skills throughout and beyond their educational career. This lack of coordination also limits the capacity to attract private sector investment to support the expansion of the sector.

Horticulture in Wales is not seen as a viable career or method of food production

Due to the limited scale of the sector, and recent historical economic and governance preference for farmers to move away from mixed farming, horticulture is not seen as a viable career opportunity. Young people entering agriculture assume that growing grass for meat or dairy production is the default option for land use and farming in Wales. This trend is exacerbated by the challenges of new entrants accessing land to start horticultural ventures. Field-scale horticultural enterprises require equipment and infrastructure that can be prohibitively expensive for new entrants, or those seeking to diversify their farming and land management.

Strengthening Wales's horticulture sector should be linked to other government priorities and embed a 'multisolving' approach

There are opportunities for developing convenience foods that feature high levels of Welsh vegetables. Current dietary and food purchasing habits which prioritise takeaways and ready meals, which are often HFSS, undermine public health efforts, contributing to a range of dietary-based NCDs, including obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular problems. There are also growing nutritional concerns over the low level of fibre in people's diets. Developing convenient foods that include high levels of Welsh vegetables would address multiple government targets: increasing public consumption of vegetables would deliver necessary health benefits and take pressure off the health service, while supporting the economic viability of the horticultural sector. This 'multisolving' approach brings together various sectors around shared challenges for mutual benefits.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings above, our proposed recommendations for the Welsh Government and local authorities include:

Support provision of accessible, affordable land for housing and growing

Utilise public land for the public good: Publicly-owned land, such as community farms, and school grounds should be maintained as a common resource and used for horticultural production. Food can be grown for schools, care homes, hospitals and other public bodies. Highly visible horticulture on public land can also raise the public profile of the sector.

Develop a land-matching service: An all-Wales database of public, private and 3rd sector owned and managed land should be developed, and used to match growers with locally available appropriate horticultural land. This land should be surveyed by ecologists and agronomists to assess the breadth and scale of potentially available horticultural land in Wales. Assessments should engage with both the current ecological status and agricultural viability of land, as well as projected changes in viability resulting from climate change.

Expand new affordable homes: New planning guidelines based on Powys County Council's Future Farms project should be widely promoted and adopted throughout rural Wales, to increase horticulturalists' access to affordable homes which are also located close to sites of food production.

De-risk the transition to field-scale horticulture

Improve infrastructure and transport: Small-scale growers consistently struggle to get their produce to markets, while markets face shortages in sourcing sufficient produce. Government-supported schemes, including support from the National Development Agency, could develop local supply chains to facilitate collection and distribution of produce. Investing in regional vegetable processing and packaging centres is also necessary for growers to maximise regional market opportunities.

Guarantee a fair price for horticulturalists: Establish accessible food hubs and a guaranteed price for growers transitioning to field-scale production. Recent initiatives such as the Welsh Veg in Schools project and changes in procurement policy can be strengthened and emulated to serve as vehicles to ensure a fair and guaranteed price for growers. Developing digital systems to link kitchens and central procurement teams, as well as a Dynamic Purchasing System, can facilitate more growers' benefiting from the economic opportunities associated with selling to Welsh procurement programmes.

Co-design regional food plans: Bring growers, businesses and consumers together to codesign annual food plans and address multiple government priorities. These include strengthening regional economies and food resilience, and improving access to affordable produce for low income communities, and people who currently consume low levels of vegetables. These plans can bring schools and the community together, to ensure that any benefits from procurement changes and a whole-school approach to food also lead to dietary changes and more plant-based consumption at home.

Strengthen B2B economic and practical links: Provide logistical, administrative and economic support for linking horticultural growers with tourism, hospitality and other businesses. There is increased consumers and business desire for local produce, but challenges around infrastructure and distribution logistics often limit the potential for growers to maximise these business opportunities. Business incentives for all hospitality-related businesses could be leveraged to encourage greater usage of horticultural produce by this sector. Regional storage facilities and distribution chains can also facilitate wider opportunities for growers to supply other businesses. Welsh tourist organisations (regional and national) can actively promote local horticultural businesses, and facilitate visitors' support of these businesses through developing web portals for easy location and purchasing directly from growers.

Highlight horticulture within National Food Strategy, and National Development Agency

Much of Wales's horticultural sector is small-scale, yet delivers multiple environmental, social and economic benefits. The disproportionately high cross-sectoral benefits delivered

by these growers should be recognised and rewarded in funding schemes, as well as highlighted in the new Welsh National Food Strategy.

Develop learning pathways into horticulture

Develop systemic horticultural education: A dedicated Welsh horticultural training body should be developed and widely promoted, addressing learning at all education levels. Horticulture should be included within wider agricultural training as a key aspect of food production. FE and HE content should cover all aspects of being a sustainable grower, including biodiversity, plant health, business skills, and practical skills.

Develop hybrid training schemes: New entrants and current growers struggle to access training, which is often physically disparate and difficult to reach. Developing combined resources where learners can access online content as well as carry out practice-based learning in their local schools, FE or HE sites could broaden learning opportunities for new entrants and CPD. This approach can also support raising awareness around horticulture and highlighting its relevance and potential to the local and national economy.

Highlight cultural significance and history of horticulture in Wales: A strong public narrative currently underpins a popular belief that Wales's food systems revolve around meat and dairy. However, up until the mid-20th century, Welsh farmers broadly incorporated cereals and horticulture into a mixed farming system. Reclaiming this heritage and promoting it in national and regional marketing and promotion schemes can help raise awareness and appreciation of Welsh horticultural produce amongst consumers, visitors, farmers and land managers.

PROJECT INFORMATION

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Further reading

Further information on LIP's Innovation Labs can be accessed at www.lpip.cymru

For more information

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