

Time to grow more of our own food

I notice in my local supermarkets a keen enthusiasm to display the Union flag on many foods the retailer can claim are home grown. There is a marked reluctance to celebrate the EU origins of continental food with an EU flag, or even to put a Dutch flag on the salad items and a Spanish flag on the vegetables that come from there. This makes it a bit more difficult for home grown food enthusiasts to spot the import. It implies the supermarkets think there are plenty of people who want to buy UK food, but not enough who will insist on EU food so they seek to disguise it.

Our time in the Common Agricultural Policy lost us a lot of market share. As recently as the mid 1980s the UK grew 84% of its own temperate food, but this had slumped to 60% last year. The EU did its best to speed the demise of sections of UK agriculture. They provided grants to remove UK orchards to give continental apples and pears a freer run at our market, on the proviso that the farmer could not replant with new fruit trees. They kept our milk industry short of quota, forcing us to import more higher value products like yoghurt and cheese from the continent. Even pro EU John Major went into battle against the severity of their beef policy in response to an unfortunate outbreak of disease.

Now we are free to grow and rear more of our own food we should do so. The Environment Department should make cutting the food miles a crucial part of its green agenda. It should tailor grant schemes to encourage new plantings, investment in mechanised nurture and harvesting, and support for on farm reservoirs and soil improvement programmes. The NFU have raised their standard over the opportunities. The Netherlands supply much of our salad stuff and flowers. They have no weather advantage over us, so we should get on and invest in competitive production with suitable government assistance of the kind they have enjoyed.

It is not a green policy to pay our landowners not to farm our land and then to import our food from hundreds of miles away with the need for so much transport, chilling and packaging to get it to us.