UK Horticulture Sector Growth Plan: Unlocking Organic and Agroecological Growth

Over recent years, demand for local, sustainably produced food in the UK has substantially increased. Yet domestic production is constrained by a range of structural barriers. Expanding organic and agroecological horticulture across the UK to meet this demand represents a significant opportunity to support environmental restoration, improve public health and strengthen the resilience of our food supply. This paper sets out practical proposals to address these barriers and explores how the UK's organic and agroecological horticulture sector could flourish with appropriate policy support. For the purposes of this paper, "organic and agroecological horticulture" refers to certified organic production alongside agroecological production systems which apply comparable principles of environmental stewardship while supporting fair and equitable food systems.

The opportunity:
To meet dietary guidelines, the UK's fruit and vegetable consumption must increase by 86%. Yet even at current levels of consumption, fresh produce represents an area of alarming vulnerability for UK food security. Not only do we import 84% of the fruit consumed nationally and almost half of our vegetables, but the majority of these imports come from highly climate-vulnerable countries. Boosting domestic horticulture is therefore essential for public health and long-term food security.

Meanwhile, the UK's organic market continues to expand year-on-year, growing by 7% in 2025, with fruit and vegetables making up the largest share of organic sales (32.6%). While much of this growth has been driven by supermarkets, the independent wholesale and retail market has also performed strongly. Organic North, one of the country's leading wholesalers of organic produce, provides a useful illustration of this trend. Over the past seven years, Organic North has increased its annual turnover by 233% to £8.5 million and now provides markets for 57 UK farmers and growers - 30 more than in 2019[1]. This positive trend will only be strengthened by the upcoming Organic Action Plan for England, which we look forward to seeing later this year.

By harnessing the momentum of the organic and agroecological market, we can ensure that the vital expansion of horticulture delivers multiple wins for people and planet - from reducing our reliance on chemical inputs to supporting resilient supply chains and attracting a new generation of growers. Analysis suggests that redirecting 21% of current vegetable import spending towards UK agroecological production could retain £588 million within the UK economy and generate up to £2 billion in social, environmental and economic benefits. This opportunity requires coordinated action.

Priorities for the next 5 years:

- **Establish a Market Garden Support Fund** to catalyse a significant increase in the number of market gardens, peri-urban farms and community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes.
- **Adapt Defra payment schemes such as FETF and SFI to support small-medium scale growers** (including those under 3ha in SFI).
- **Develop a national horticulture training programme**, including apprenticeships, traineeships and mentoring.
- **Invest in processing, packing and distribution infrastructure** to link growers to wider regional and national markets.
- **Reform planning policy** to support rural worker dwellings and horticultural infrastructure (such as polytunnels and packing sheds).
- **Strengthen supply chain fairness** through policies that promote good trading practices, ensure fair prices for growers, and protect against unfair competition from low-cost imports.
- **Initiate data collection** on economic, environmental, health and social benefits of organic and agroecological horticulture, to build a national picture and benchmark for future sector growth.
- **Increase the procurement of organic fruit and vegetables across the public sector,** building on successful pilot models (such as Bridging the Gap) to improve access to healthy and sustainable food.

Our 10-year vision
If these proposals were implemented, by 2036 we envisage a thriving organic and agroecological horticulture sector, with a significant increase in the number of market gardens, peri-urban farms and

community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes supplying communities across the UK. Adapted government support would have enabled small and medium-scale growers to establish and expand viable businesses, creating a more diverse and productive horticulture sector which is resilient to future climate and geopolitical shocks.

A new generation of farmers and growers would have entered the sector through accessible training, apprenticeships, traineeships and mentoring, supported by fair and effective government schemes. Expanded local storage, packing and processing infrastructure would connect growers to wider regional and national markets while maintaining shorter, more resilient supply chains. Reformed planning policy would support essential infrastructure, such as polytunnels, packing sheds and rural workers' dwellings, making it easier to establish, expand and staff horticultural businesses. Investment in on-farm renewable energy, water security and resource efficiency would further strengthen the resilience and circularity of production systems, reduce waste and improve the efficient use of natural resources.

Strong trading standards and fair supply chain practices would ensure that UK growers receive fair returns for their produce and are protected from unfair competition from low-cost imports. Operating on a level playing field, organic and agroecological operations would be able to reinvest in future production, provide viable livelihoods and contribute to a more resilient food system.

A decade of robust evidence would demonstrate the environmental and socio-economic benefits of organic and agroecological horticulture, including improvements in public health, productivity, resilience, soil health, carbon sequestration and biodiversity. Demonstrating clear progress towards the goals set out in the Farming Roadmap 2050, this evidence would provide a strong foundation for increasing the ambition of future policy development.

Public procurement would consistently prioritise UK-grown organic produce, creating a stable and reliable source of demand for growers while improving access to healthy, sustainable food for all. Building on this success, government could strengthen statutory procurement guidance and progressively increase the proportion of organic food purchased beyond its manifesto commitment for 50% of publicly procured food to come from local or sustainable sources. The certainty created by strong public procurement targets would encourage continued investment in organic and agroecological production, supporting more conventional producers to transition towards these systems in response to the mounting evidence of their resilience to climate change.

Looking ahead to 2050:

By 2050, agroecological horticulture should be recognised not only for the food it produces, but also for the full range of public goods it delivers - from healthier diets and restored ecosystems to skilled employment and resilient rural economies. Fully integrated into mainstream agricultural education, research and policy, organic and agroecological horticulture would no longer be viewed as a niche approach, but as a leading model for resilient, productive and environmentally sustainable food production.

Small, medium and large-scale producers would be working together to meet a strong demand for healthy and sustainable food, ensuring domestic production accounts for a larger proportion of fruit and vegetables consumed nationally. As a result, the UK would be substantially more food secure for fresh produce, with supply chains more able to adapt to the unpredictability of a changing climate. This steady supply would support the country's increasing ambition for public procurement to prioritise local and sustainable produce. By this point, England would sit alongside Denmark in leading the way for organic in public procurement, helping to improve access to sustainably grown fruit and vegetables across the country.

Horticultural training and skills development would continue to expand, with sustained investment in technical, business and leadership skills. This would enable new entrants not only to establish successful enterprises but also to scale their businesses up, mentor future generations of growers and drive innovation across the sector. Organic and agroecological horticulture would therefore be viewed as an attractive and accessible career path for anyone interested in land-based work, regardless of their background.

Growers will have been supported to transition away from the use of peat in horticulture as well as conventional cultivation on peatland soils, a shift which will have played a key role in decarbonising the sector. Increased investment in farmer-led research and innovation will have helped to identify viable, sustainable solutions to enable this transition. Lowland peatlands will have seen a major uptake in sustainable alternatives, such as paludiculture, while fruit and vegetable production will have been relocated to other parts of the country, including urban and peri-urban areas – horticulture, as a whole, will have been largely decentralised.

Achieving this vision will require ambitious long-term targets, including land settlement goals for new entrants, domestic supply targets, expanded public procurement of organic produce, and sustained investment in plant breeding and seed production programmes.

Conclusion:

The UK has both the market demand and the productive capacity to build a thriving organic and agroecological horticulture sector. What is currently lacking is not consumer demand, but a policy framework that enables growers to invest, innovate and expand. With coordinated action over the coming decades, the UK can develop a resilient horticultural sector that strengthens food security, restores nature, supports rural livelihoods and delivers lasting benefits for public health and the wider economy.

Questions for Food, Farming and Partnership Board

- Will the FFPB recommend that comprehensive data starts to be collected about the market garden sector?
- What does the FFPB think needs to happen regarding food prices (in relation to the increasing production costs for horticulture and the need for producers to get a sufficient return on their production)?
- We have the opportunity to present our HSGP proposals to our peers at the Organic Growers Gathering, at the end of September. Can we invite feedback at that stage or will the initial HSGP have been settled on by then?

Endnotes:

1. Organic North. Internal sales data, 2019–2026.