

We're sowing the seeds of food insecurity

With inflation rising and the global supply chain in peril, it's imperative Britain grows more of its own produce again

Alice Thomson

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Some farmers aren't sowing crops this spring. "What's the point," one neighbour explained. "Diesel costs are sky high and fertiliser is so expensive, I might as well stay in bed."

Red diesel, used on farms, has already shot up from 75p a litre to over £1 this year. It's needed for ploughing, planting and harvesting crops such as wheat and barley. The most popular artificial fertilisers, which contain ammonia and sulphur from the Middle East, have doubled in price. Dairy farmers are also facing severe problems with energy-intensive milk production.

The cost of growing crops looks likely to rise by, on average, £150-£250 per hectare, and that's not including the possibility of poor weather conditions this summer. Dairy farmers say the war has added £200 to the annual cost of each cow in their herd. Many farmers will struggle to make any profit and will tip further into debt, the National Farmers' Union warns. It's easy to see why its members might decide to leave their fields fallow if planting causes a loss; they are businesses, not charities.

Britain is facing a food crisis. It started with the war in Ukraine, when Europe's breadbasket came under attack, and has escalated with America's war with Iran and the continuing missile strikes on the Strait of Hormuz, preventing a third of the materials for synthetic fertiliser and a quarter of oil and gas supplies from reaching the West. Britain could also see shortages of chicken and pork if the closure continues and leads to a run on carbon dioxide worldwide, critical to the slaughter industry and food preservation.

Food prices are on track to be 50 per cent higher in November than at the start of the cost of living crisis in 2021. The Bank of England has warned that food inflation is expected to rise to 7 per cent by the end of the year.

With a population of nearly 70 million, the British consume ten million loaves of bread a day, 17 million litres of milk and 29 million eggs. We also eat on average 89g of meat each a day, 200g of vegetables and 90g of potatoes. That's before all the snacks. We're a nation that loves our picky bits and sweet treats as much as meat and two veg. But the country now only produces 62 per cent of its own food; the rest is imported, with the majority arriving through two ports, Dover and Felixstowe.

Who cares if we are no longer self-sufficient? Surely we can just buy it all in, often more cheaply, with most food sourced from the Netherlands, France, Ireland and Germany, which have similar climates to ours. But that will depend on supply lines staying open and other countries not hoarding for their own inhabitants. Forget the threat to holidays from the rising cost of jet fuel, food is crucial to the nation's survival.

In Finland, with a less temperate climate than the UK, they see food security as an urgent priority, producing 80 per cent of their needs; in Sweden they have created a national grain reserve. The Swiss and Japanese have stockpiles in case of emergency, the US is self-sufficient, yet the British are merely advised to have three days' worth of supplies in their cupboards.

It would be foolish to think that this country is safe as the world becomes more fragile. Our ports and airports, 131 food distribution hubs and supermarkets' software systems are easy targets for cyber warfare and conventional attacks. Professor Tim Lang, author of *Just In Case*, examined the UK's food resilience for the National Preparedness Commission last year and warned that Britain is highly vulnerable.

If the global supply chain is challenged, droughts intensify or cyber terrorists attack, we will be quickly compromised. Farmers will have to learn to work without fertiliser but that will lower their yields. Currently the government is promoting solar farms and Defra schemes prioritise environmental initiatives. These encourage farmers financially to boost nature, plant winter bird fuel, create new hedges, plant woodland to offset corporate CO2 emissions — but not to feed humans. Meanwhile, the Treasury has hiked inheritance tax and employment costs for farmers, and is still contemplating a new tax on packaging.

Ministers need to return to an emphasis on food production as they did during the Common Agricultural Policy years, guaranteeing farmers a minimum payment for securing our food supply. There should also be incentives for those looking to set up market gardens and promote horticulture in towns and cities to produce more of our own fresh fruit and vegetables: 83 per cent of fruit is currently sourced from abroad.

We must buy more locally again to cut back on transport costs, throw less away and eat more in season. This doesn't need to mean a return to medieval ways. James Dyson has shown that you can produce excellent strawberries grown vertically using the energy from the anaerobic digestion of plants to heat his glasshouses in Lincolnshire. In Essex, planning permission has finally been given to build a mega-greenhouse to produce 6 per cent of our tomatoes, powered by burning rubbish.

Regenerative farming, which relies on crop rotation and improved soils rather than synthetic fertilisers, should be supported to boost both food production and nature. The Billingham ammonia plant in Teesside, the last plant in the country that produces ammonium nitrate, must be kept going to help conventional farmers.

There are also 20 million private gardens in the UK, but homeowners have paved over 42 per cent of their area. The best way to grow food is close to the kitchen, even if it's on a windowsill or in a nearby allotment. The younger generation may rent but they have started the trend. I interviewed one landscape gardener this week, Harry Holding, who wants everyone to grow their own produce and next week publishes *Eat Your Garden*: not so much dig for victory as plant for health and peace of mind.