

Watton goes under the hammer before closure

Alex Lawson

Watton Produce is to close down its operations in Norfolk and embark on a £25 million fire sale.

The carrot supplier is to sell off 18 lines from its processing and packaging facility at a live and online auction on 20 July.

Watton Produce has more than 50 years experience focused on the supply of carrots and parsnips for the retail, foodservice and wholesale markets.

Last week, Cambridgeshire business Alan Bartlett & Sons bought former Watton subsidiary Moray Coast Produce.

Much of the equipment to be sold from the Norfolk site was only installed in 2010 and some has recently been fully serviced.

In its last accounts submission to Companies House, auditors M+A Partners said that the company had net current liabilities of £2.7m and was "dependent upon the bankers and other related companies for ongoing financial support" and said "the matters explained... indicate the existence of an uncertainty which may cast doubt about the company's ability to continue as a going concern".

The company returned a pre-tax loss of £791,296 for the year to 4 April 2010, down from a profit of £152,798 the previous year. Its turnover was £20.8m in 2010, up on £18.1m in 2009.

The "unmissable auction" is run by Clarke Fussells and includes multi-head weighers,



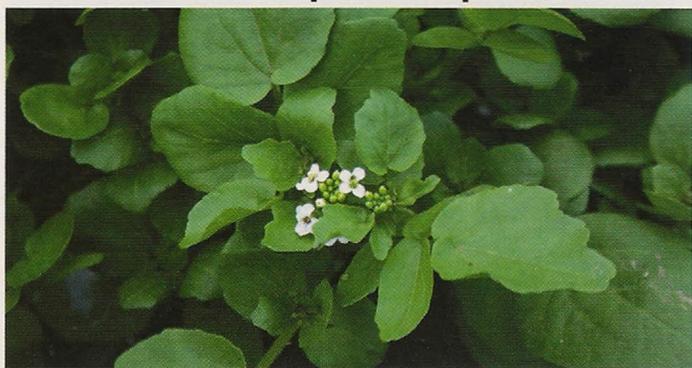
The Norfolk carrot firm is to close

vibratory feeding lines, a bunch carrot washing line and a triple grading system.

The company said the site has to be cleared by 5 August and the auctioneers said "failure to collect goods by the clearance date will result in charges being applied for removal and storage".

Watton declined to comment. ■

Petition puts pressure on watercress perception



The Watercress Company (TWC) is looking to convince both the multiples and consumers that the edible flowers that can occur on a watercress crop are not only harmless but an addition to the average pack of watercress leaves.

TWC MD Tom Amery is hoping to engage in talks with certain supermarkets to change the specification for bagged watercress to include the small white flowers, which have a peppery taste. The move has the backing of more than 1,000 consumers who signed a petition at the Watercress Festival.

Amery told FPJ: "The flowers can appear at a certain stage of growth and if we have a watercress bed that has some flowers at the point of harvest, it doesn't meet the specifications and it is a huge waste. Watercress is part of the nasturtium family anyway and the flowers don't affect the overall taste of the product, as they are pretty similar to the leaves. It would be good to have the freedom to include them and although we could not guarantee the crop flowering, it could well end up a feature." ■

Changes at Fresca

Fresca Group has announced three senior management changes.

Stephen Swainston joins as a new senior commercial manager at DGM Growers and Mack Vegetables. He moves from Flamingo Holdings UK where he was business development manager. He takes up his new role on 27 June and will be based at Evesham.

This move frees up DGM and Mack Vegetables commercial director Chris Butler, who will move back to Paddock Wood and will take over the running of MMG Citrus from Garry Cirillo on 1 September.

In turn, Cirillo will take over Fresca's high care and foodservice operation in Southampton. He will also take over commercial responsibility for a new high-care vegetable facility at the DGM Growers site in Holbeach.

David Barratt will leave Mack Service at the end of August after 15 years with the business. ■

In brief

» Berry Gardens grower AR Neaves & Sons has become one of the first in the UK to supply the supermarkets with English cherries this season. The producer, based at Doddington in Kent, has benefited from the continued spell of warm weather. "The long spell of dry weather has its challenges for fruit growers like other areas of agriculture and horticulture, but we have gained so far from having an early season on all fruit which means that our overall season will be extended and that soft-fruit crops especially will have increased yields," said Sarah Neaves, farm manager at AR Neaves.



» Israeli exporter Agrexco revealed it made a loss of some Shk70m (€14.2m) during 2010 on turnover of Shk2.5bn (€508m), reports *Eurofruit*. The results follow recent news that agricultural collective Granot, Israel's largest regional marketing body and a major supplier of citrus and avocados to Agrexco, is switching its export volumes to rival group Mtex. Agrexco chief executive David Bondi is believed to be looking to trim its staff by around 150 employees – equal to around 30 per cent of its total workforce – through lay-offs and early retirements.

» Anglia Pea Growers, which struck a deal with own-label frozen fresh produce supplier Ardo UK last year after being dropped by Bird's Eye, will be the focus of a new brand, Who Grew My Peas? Ardo UK told FPJ it is in talks with major multiples and pub and restaurant chains over where and how to use the logo. An accompanying website is to launch on Monday.