

ASPIRE : ASParagus, Integrating Research on Decline in Europe

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Decline in asparagus productivity resulting in decreased crop profitability is a common constraint for European growers. The problem is being addressed by ASPIRE, an EU Concerted Action project led by Sally Runham and Wilson Dyer of ADAS in the UK, aiming to reduce the effects of asparagus decline across Europe.

Asparagus is a long-term crop with the crowns remaining productive for up to 20 years. The European crop is worth £570 million with 245,000 employed in the production of 60,000 ha. Asparagus has a high capital requirement for establishment and reaches profitability after 5 years. The crop may suffer from a premature loss in productivity which can be attributed to a range of factors, including *Fusarium* spp., autotoxins, soil physical properties (e.g. compaction) and soil fertility. The gross margin obtained for a productive crop (up to £4,500/ha) is substantially lower where the crop is debilitated due to decline symptoms.

ASPIRE brings together key researchers representing all aspects of asparagus production and two growers within a single forum, drawing on expertise from eight EU member states, one east European country and an invited consultant from New Zealand. The overall objectives are i) collate and evaluate the existing information on the incidence, causal factors and current controls against decline in EU asparagus crops, ii) to develop a unified EU strategy for reducing or delaying the effects of decline, and iii) to co-ordinate future research across the EU.

The first of three workshops involving all consortium members was held at PPO Lelystad, The Netherlands (17-20 July, 2001). Country representatives provided an update of asparagus production, decline problems and relevant research activities. There was also the opportunity to identify gaps in current understanding of asparagus decline and to initiate working groups for proposal development. Questionnaires have been prepared and circulated to asparagus researchers and growers across Europe and a report prepared. Subsequent workshops in Greece and Spain will include technical discussions on standard methods for assessment of decline and the development of an integrated crop management strategy.

ASPIRE results will be disseminated to EU asparagus growers by the production of a handbook. Moreover, the ASPIRE web site (www.euroaspire.net), will incorporate workshop recommendations, questionnaire summaries and a database to be accessed by researchers and growers to improve their decision-making processes. The Concerted

Action has already led to the formation of a robust network of asparagus researchers and producers, providing a sound framework for future research.

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Photo caption:

Members of the ASPIRE consortium, PPO Lelystad, The Netherlands, July 2001