

Bomber Country Produce – Grower Profile

A Lincolnshire family farming business is going from strength to strength by growing and packing leeks for supermarkets.

The Casey family started farming at Willow Farm, near Coningsby, with 100 acres in 1971. Today the family works approximately 1,800 acres, including tenanted land, with enterprises spanning asparagus, cereals, sugar beet and a 1,000 head pig enterprise.

A focus on leeks

Leeks however are very much the primary focus. They have been grown on the farm since 1991, starting with just six acres. Today leeks grow across 150 acres, with a purpose-built pack house producing 1,500 tonnes of produce annually.

Three generations of the Casey family are involved with the farm. They include Mervyn and his wife Marilyn, their children Tim and Nicola, Nicola's husband Adam and most recently their son William who has started working on the farm during the school holidays.

A family business

Tim, who graduated from Harper Adams University in 2008 spent a period working in Portugal's fresh produce industry before returning to the farm where he now has the role of production manager. Nicola is the farm's technical manager and oversees logistic while Adam oversees the growing and field operations.

In addition to the family around 30 permanent and seasonal staff are employed on the farm. They are led by a team of supervisors: Donna Sharp, Kintija Zukovska and Maris Sirsins who manage the packhouse and field, ensuring efficient production and maintaining quality control.

The Casey's farm predominantly on sandy loam soil. Different varieties of leeks are grown in succession with lots of effort put in to ensure plants thrive. Fields are irrigated on a regular basis and early plants are covered with fleece to create a warm micro-climate. The farm uses a mobile leek rig, including a wash, so that the finished product comes directly off the field, before being packed in the packhouse and going straight on to the retailer. Further innovations include the introduction of precision guided machinery for weed control, along with automated lines in the packhouse.

The leeks from the farm are fully assured and traceable. As well as various supermarket schemes, the farm is proud to hold the LEAF mark and Red Tractor license. The farm is signed up to the Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI).

A fast-paced operation

Modern day farming is fast paced. A typical day for Tim Casey would be a 6.30am start, morning checks on the packhouse and the fields then some time back in the office for paperwork and meetings – Tim sits on the Red Tractor Fresh Produce Board and is chair of the Leek Growers Association, while Adam is on the local drainage board. Trailers are then organised to collect the leeks from the fields and at around midday orders from retailer customers come in. It's then a quick turnaround to get the order ready for distribution, with work finishing in the fields at

around 3pm and in the packhouse at around 4pm. The empty trailers are then prepared for the next day. This rapid dispatch means that consumers get the freshest of leeks on their plates.

Good farming practices

The Casey's have always farmed responsibly, following good farming practice and using voluntary initiatives. These include leaving eight acres of grassland as permanent pasture, cover strips for birds, over wintered stubbles and the maintenance of nearly three acres of low-lying wetland. There are also five acres of woodland.

For Tim Casey the best part of the job is working with crops that see him harvesting year-round, meaning there is always a reason to be outside in the open air. His favourite leek dish is a simple one, fried leeks with butter and seasoning.