

# Sainsbury's to phase out Everest

**Brian Lovelidge**

**A rumour** is circulating within the strawberry industry that next season two supermarkets plan to drop Everest. The variety represents some 75% of the everbearer market.

The move would mean many thousands of Everest plants now being raised and quite a large area of established beds would have to be scrapped at considerable expense to propagators and growers.

One propagator, who wishes to remain anonymous, said that the hundreds of thousands of plants he is raising to order are now unwanted so there must be something in the rumour.

However, Waitrose, one of the supermarkets concerned, told the *Grower* that it has no intention of dropping the variety yet, while the other, Sainsbury's, said it was trying to phase out the variety.

## Requirements

"We're responding to our customers' requirements," said a Sainsbury's spokeswoman. "Everest is not their favourite strawberry – they don't actually like it – so where our British suppliers can grow another [better] late season variety we'll take it." One of the supermarket's main growers in Scotland, where most of its late strawberries are produced, has already dropped Everest and is growing Elsanta [60-day] for late season production instead. Another is phasing out Everest next season.

Other Scottish growers have said that they are unable to reduce their Everest production next year but Sainsbury's are working with them to identify replacement varieties.

Waitrose's approach

appears to be more circumspect. "We cannot say that we'll be taking less Everest because I'm in the middle of writing next season's strawberry programme," said Nicky Baggot, the company's soft fruit buyer. "But there's really nothing to replace it at present.

"If we decided to come out of Everest we would not be dropping it immediately," she promised. "It takes time to propagate new varieties and so its withdrawal would be on a longer time scale than one season."

## Decision

Nicky Baggot pointed out that her department works closely with growers [and marketers] and if anything happened on the variety front they will be told about it. "It's not a case of us making a decision and then throwing it at them."

She added: "We've grown 30% on strawberries this year. This is throughout the season... We had an outstanding June, and a good August with Everest and Elsanta, thanks to good availability, good quality and a good promotional package.

Adam Olins, md of BerryWorld, Waitrose's category manager, confirmed that his growers 'know exactly what's happening in Waitrose' and so are aware that the store will be taking Everest next season.

## Replacement

"Sainsbury's say they have been looking for an Everest replacement for three years, so there's nothing new there," he asserted. "As long as Tesco's, Morrison's, ASDA and Safeway take it this means that if Sainsbury's don't, unless there's a replacement out there they will be uncompetitive with the others."

Peter Vinson, whose com-



*Strawberry breeder Peter Vinson. "There's a bit of overreaction to the [Everest] situation," he reckoned*

pany Edward Vinson Plants launched Everest in 1998, agreed that it's impossible for supermarkets to quickly switch varieties. He believes that supermarkets do intend to run down their Everest procurement in due course.

"There's been a bit of overreaction to the situation," he reckoned. "And what the supermarkets say they're going to do and what they actually do or are forced to do when circumstances change is not always the same. One said it was not going to take Florence and Symphony any more but it did so when it was short of fruit in the second week of July.

"In my view there won't be enough of other varieties out there next season for supermarkets not to take Everest," said Peter Vinson. "And conversations with our customers [for plants] suggest that most will want to plant Everest again.

"About 12 million Everest plants were put in this year [enough for some 1,200 acres]," he claimed. "They will be cut back this season but I don't know by how much." Peter Vinson admitted that he has always been critical of Everest and is amazed at how well it's

done. But it has been the best everbearer available.

## Colour

Supermarkets consider the variety's colour is less desirable than that of some other varieties in that it can go very dark in hot weather, he added. On the plus side its eating quality tends to be pretty consistent and it crops early and yields well.

"When we introduced Everest we were confident that it would do 10 tonnes/acre," recalled Peter Vinson. "Some growers have been doing substantially more but this year some will not do 10 tonnes." He pointed out that although there are alternatives like Flamenco and Jubilee, insufficient plants of them have been propagated to replace Everest [and Jubilee serves the premium market]. Another Vinson everbearer, EV2, has been exclusive to BerryWorld for five years and will be on general release in 2006, he said. However, he sees it as more of an adjunct to rather than a replacement for Everest.

"EV2 has some advantages over Everest and some disadvantages," reckoned Peter Vinson. "It's finding a very good place on mainland Europe."