

# FARMERS WEEKLY



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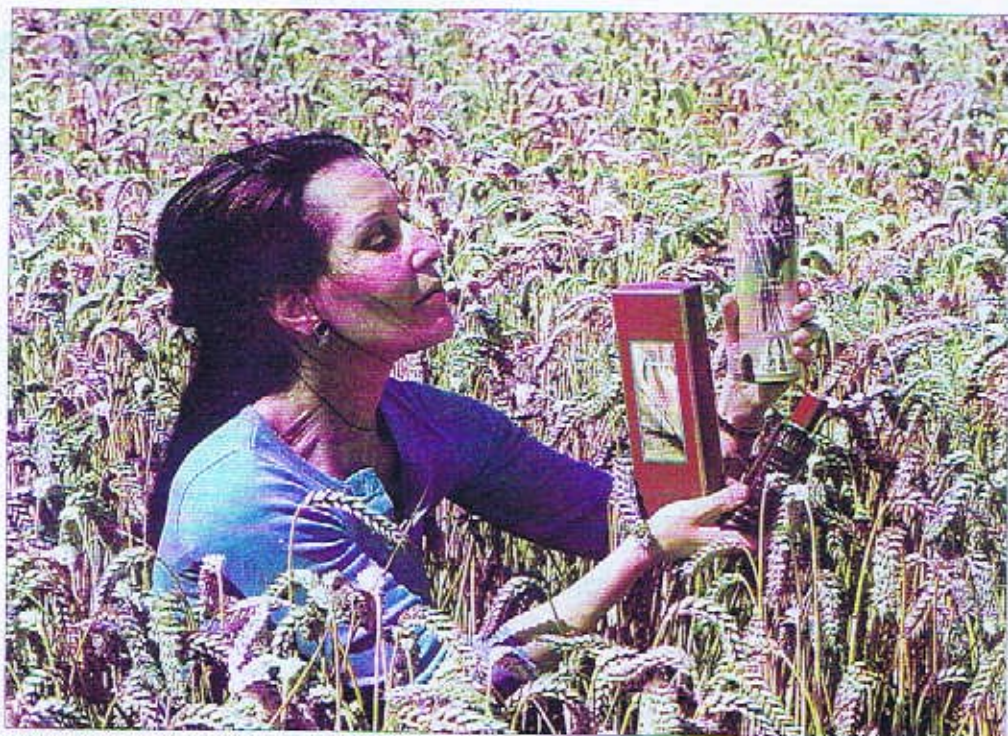
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# FARM STAFF

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The Americans have a fascination with Englishness, it seems. Or they soon will if a farm diversification near the Kent coast is anything to go by. **Julian Gairdner** went to Lees Court Estate



Lady Sondes with the products that capture "wheat glamour".

## Germ of a beautiful business

WHAT COULD be more quintessentially English than farming? It's an image which Lady Sondes, an American-born countess, is aiming to trade on with her recently-launched brand of bath, beauty and home products based on wheat germ oil extracted from a crop grown on her in-hand farm at the Lees Court Estate.

Talking to her in the drawing room of her immaculately-kempt traditional Kent farmhouse, you get the impression of a woman of exacting standards, and a determination to succeed.

And with a business background and contacts in the beauty products world in the US, it's not surprising that she's opted for a very different "farm" enterprise.

"I view diversification very differently as an American woman compared to a UK farmer," she says. That probably explains why she's prepared to take on Gucci, Dior, or Yves St Laurent at their own game, in some of New York's top stores.

Back in the spring, a product range of her 'Seeds - The Countess Sondes Collection' was launched in the Big Apple. Patrons of Bergdorf-Goodman, and now Fred Segal in Los Angeles, will find their eyes and noses drawn to what Lady Sondes calls wheat glamour.

Body scrubs, soaps, candles and



**"Wheat represents farming's traditions"**

even a potpourri of scented wheat seeds are on offer - all based on a wheat crop grown on an English farm of an English estate. "Seeds encapsulates the farming image, while wheat represents farming's traditions," she says.

The existing Seeds collection is just the start. "In getting involved with wheat germ oil extraction, we've become committed to the world of non-food crops - pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals and biofuels," she says. That means in addition to oilseed rape grown on set-aside land for biodiesel, her 325ha (800-acre) farm grows echium and is trialling sweet quinoa, and calendula. "The oil from the echium will go into the next Seeds range."

Beauty products are not the only thing that interests Lady Sondes. Widowed in 1996 after Lord Sondes' death from cancer, she is driven by preserving his legacy through respect for tradition, and care for the environment on the 1820ha (4500-acre) estate.

"Look at the diversity of insects on the echium," she says as we wade our way through the knee-high blue-flowered crop, causing a shimmer of colourful wings to erupt. She points also to the fact that echium is spring sown. "That allows us to leave winter stubbles that benefit wildlife."

The estate's commercial shoot

reflects an environmental approach too. "The goalposts have moved," Lady Sondes says, referring to the way in which field sports are viewed today. "We have a joint project with The Game Conservancy Trust looking at the conservation and biodiversity benefits of management practices to conserve game at Lees Court and four other comparison sites. We're in the third year of five."

Already, the anecdotal evidence demonstrating the benefits to wildlife are obvious, she contends. But she believes it's possible to farm profitably as well as sensitively through the adoption of 'integrated crop management'. "The aim is for our commercial shoot to have as much bio-diversity as a wild shoot, without harming crop yields at all."

In the meantime, at \$20-40 (£13-25) a pop for a body wash or scented candle, she's hoping for a tidy yield on her considerable investment in research, marketing and merchandising. And it's something she wants those at Lees Court to be involved with.

"Everyone on the estate is aware of what we're trying to do," she says. "Our tenants may even become growers of crops for the oils in the future."

Next stop Harvey Nicks? "We hope to be in the London market within a year," she says. ■