

PICTURES: GEOFF PUGH

Our green and pleasant land turns purple

By CHARLES CLOVER
ENVIRONMENT EDITOR

THE colour of countryside in summer is evolving. Where once there was the yellow and green of ripe corn and mown grass, this Kent estate was blooming yesterday with the orange and purple of marigolds and vipers bugloss.

Calendula and echium, as they are commercially known, are being grown for chemicals used in food additives and natural medicines by the New York-born Countess Sodes.

Lady Sodes, who took over the running of the 4,500-acre Lees Court estate near Faversham when her husband, the fifth Earl Sodes, died in 1996, has become one of Britain's foremost advocates of non-food crops.

The crops are grown to produce paint, food additives, pharmaceuticals, biofuels and fibre – such as hemp.

Lady Sodes believes that non-food crops could take over up to a third of the cropped area of the country within a decade. She is not alone. There is now a National Non-Food Crops Centre in Yorkshire, with full Government backing.

This year she is growing 40

acres, out of 1,000 acres farmed in-hand, the rest being tenanted. The echium, which contains Omega 3 fatty acids also found in fish, is going to a new venture on the farm, a range of body and beauty products to be launched next year.

The calendula is being grown under contract for a Yorkshire company. She and her staff are also growing Quinoa, a seed often grown to feed game birds, which produces a gluten-free flour and has other uses.

The price echium seed fetches is very high – £3,500 a ton – but the original seed is expensive and yields are low at about 100kg an acre.

Lady Sodes says it compares favourably with wheat in financial terms, for which her estate, on the best grade of agricultural land, achieves some of the best yields in the country.

The benefits of growing crops such as calendula and echium are that they need very little nitrogen and are hugely attractive to birds, insects and other wildlife.

Lady Sodes said: "There are great opportunities in the countryside. We are looking at a wonderful change in agriculture. The technology there."



A magnificent display of calendula. The benefits of such crops include needing little nitrogen



Lady Sodes: 'We are looking at a wonderful change in agriculture. The technology is there.'



A field of echium, which contains Omega 3 fatty acids also found in fish. Non-food crops are grown to produce pharmaceuticals, food additives, biofuels and fibre