

Beauty spot Wheat fields transformed by body care crops



Pot marigold being grown near Faversham for the healing cream it yields. Other crops provide body lotion and face cream Photograph: Martin Godwin

Peter Hetherington

Passersby are intrigued by splashes of violet, orange and green in the wheat fields of east Kent.

Strange plants, dismissed by some as kerbside weeds, are emerging as a valuable commodity on the Lees Court estate, near Faversham, as a new aristocracy begins to tap the market for non-food crops.

After a modest experiment turning wheatgerm oil into a beauty treatment last year, the estate's owner, Lady Sondes, has taken an adventurous leap forward by planting purple viper's bugloss, or echium, pot marigold – calendula – and sweet quinoa.

American-born Lady Sondes, who took over the 4,500-acre estate on the North Downs after the

death of her husband in 1996, has planted 20 acres of echium, now standing 3ft high, alongside the wheat.

Once harvested, it will be processed and used for body lotion and face or sun cream. Similarly, oil will be extracted from the two acres of bright green quinoa, native to the Andes – its seeds were once ground and eaten – and

used for lotion. Cream derived from the small plot of orange calendula is said to have healing properties.

Lady Sondes has taken a lead in British farming by diversifying into crops which, unlike cereals, attract no subsidy from the EU's common agricultural policy. It is facing reform in an attempt to curb over-production.

"While I'm not suggesting

this will wipe out traditional farming, some farmers are clearly having difficulty making a living and it could provide a way out for them – a kind of niche market in non-food crops," she said.

Already, markets have been identified in pharmaceuticals, nutraceuticals – foods with health benefits – and care products.