

ARABLE ADVICE YOU CAN TRUST

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Crops



Fields of gold

Novel ideas for the perfect perfume

Scenting an opportunity

It's what's in the box that makes one 'out-of-the-box' diversification on an English estate so unique. **Julian Gairdner** finds out more



Lees Court Estate, Faversham, Kent

- 4,500 acres
- 6 tenant farms
- 30 residential properties
- Commercial shoot
- In-hand farm 900 acres
- Mostly grade 1 Hamble + Batcombe series
- Wheatrape/dried peas / set aside (natural regeneration/wild bird cover/grass/industrial reape)
- Farm manager plus assistant
- 2 tractors 160hp and 140hp
- Claas Lexion combine harvester
- Plough/ power harrow/ combination drill (small area of land min-tilled)
- Wheat varieties: Mainly first wheat — Malacca foku Solstice and English
- Second wheat — X48
- Wheat average — 10t/ha

LET'S be honest. How many growers have thought about taking on Gucci or Yves St Laurent in New York's leading speciality stores, with a crop of wheat grown near

the Kent coast?

That's exactly what Lady Sondes of the Lees Court Estate near Faversham and her team have done. And in March this year, a beauty care product range

including a body wash, body polish, moisturiser, and soap, was launched in America, all based on oil extracted from 200 tonnes of wheat grown on the in-hand farm.

to establish the best way for extracting the oil," says Miss Deen-Sly. "And we wanted a physical process rather than one that relied on chemicals, while ensuring the beneficial

provenance and contacts that had to come up with the product range, design, packaging, scent, and promotion. "We didn't want a stark image," she says. "We put a team of consultants together to

Flowers of the future. Lady Sondes expects novel crops such as calendula to contribute to the next line of products in the 'Seeds' range

the original marketing ideas forward. "We'll be looking at the UK market as well as the US within a year," Lady Sondes says.

So why should it work — after all, there are plenty of top-range beauty care products out there already. Perhaps it's because not everyone is in such a privileged position as Lady Sondes. Not only because of her status, but also because she looks at UK farming in a different light to those who have grown up in it. "I'm an American and I don't really know anything about English farming. But I believe my naivety is my strength."

That's why the branding plays heavily on the English countryside, the need to "deal with the worst farming crisis," and Lady Sondes' desire to protect her husband's legacy, following his death from cancer in 1996. His Earl's coronet features strongly on the packaging and literature.

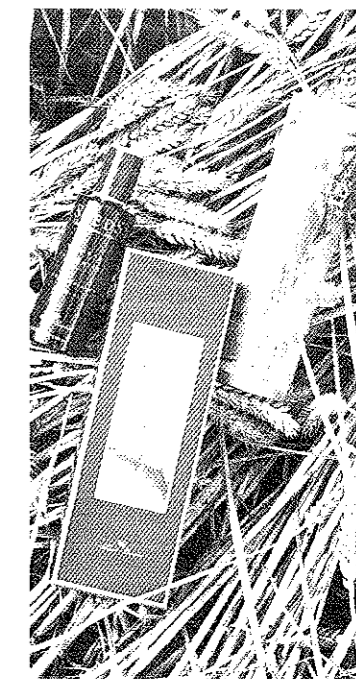
And then there's the brand name. "It's called 'Seeds'," she says. "In time, the product range will include other oils from crops such as echium, quinoa, and calendula, which we've started to grow. 'Seeds' encapsulates the farming image, while wheat represents farming's traditions."

Beautiful wheat How it stacks up

GETTING the wheat from the farm to the US as extracted oil has been overseen by farming adviser Charles Ireland of Strutt and Parker. "Last season's milling wheat was sold to Heygates for an average of £81/t," he says. "The conversion costs to purchase the wheat germ back from Heygates, extract the oil, and for all the transport in the UK and to the US, comes to £16,725, or £77.50/t," he says.

The farm production cost of the wheat is £63/t, giving total production costs of getting the oil to New York of £141/t. Lees Court adds a margin of 10-15% on the net production costs (£141/t less £81/t) to arrive at a charge for the oil to 'Seeds'.

"That adds about £9/t to the bottom line," says Mr Ireland. "But of course it doesn't include the profit margin that 'Seeds' makes on its products, which should really be added in."



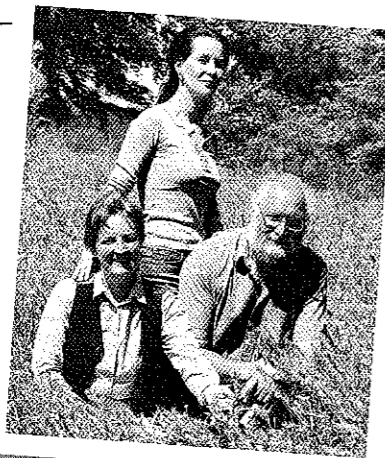
Extracting the best

EXTRACTING oil from seeds can be done two ways — cold pressing or chemical processing — explains Liz Deen-Sly (left, with farm manager, Bill Harburn and Lady Sondes). "Chemical processing is the most cost-effective because of the low oil content of wheatgerm — about 8%," she says. "But after flushing and filtering, minute amounts of chemical residue can be left in the oil."

Cold pressing, she says, doesn't use chemicals, but it can't extract as much oil. "It can also squeeze out the beneficial antioxidants. So instead we've opted for a 'secret' process that keeps the oil in better condition for longer, and has the equivalent output to the chemical process."

200t of Malacca made up the first consignment. That produced 2t of wheat germ, from which 254 litres of oil has been extracted. The germ is purchased back from Heygates, the flour miller, for £300/t.

The oil is shipped to a US manufacturer which mixes it with other key ingredients to make the product range.



"The idea came in the spring of 2001 when we were looking to diversify," says estate administrator, Liz Deen-Sly. "Lady Sondes had marketing and business contacts in the US, so we thought about growing lavender, but our grade one soil was too good. That's when we thought about extracting oil from wheat, as we get such good yields on the farm."

But such an ambitious plan was going to need not only considerable investment — six figures — but also no small amount of research, in particular how to separate the wheat germ, and then extract the oil from it.

Two companies became an important part in the chain. Heygates, the flour miller based near Northampton, purchased the estate's milling wheat, and then sold back the wheat germ, guaranteeing all the necessary quality and traceability protocols. Springdale Crop Synergies, the novel crop specialists, made arrangements for the oil to be extracted at a secret location.

Why the secrecy? "We had

antioxidants in the oil weren't damaged. We eventually found a method that we want to keep to ourselves. We have a secrecy clause with the people we're working with, but it's not a process we can patent as it's being done with other oils already."

With the supply side taken care of, it was Lady Sondes' marketing

Body care — the 'Seeds' range

- 'Wheat essence' scent
- Wheatgerm oil
- Body polisher
- Body wash
- Body lotion
- Hand soap
- Scented candles
- Potpourri



make wheat glamorous."

No expense has been spared. One of New York's top perfumers came up with the unique scent "designed to remind people of the countryside," Lady Sondes confirms. She's also working with a merchandising company that previously held the Valentino licence. That company is taking