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# Trick behind autumn crop of asparagus

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British-grown asparagus has hit supermarket shelves for the latest time ever thanks to the scorching Indian summer.

The UK's first commercial crop of autumn asparagus is being harvested four months after the traditional season ended in June.

Growers are expecting a bumper crop after last week's unprecedented heatwave boosted vegetable growth by a staggering 10 inches a day.

The Wye Valley Autumn Asparagus was harvested following a six-year trial using a Mediterranean strain of the vegetable. Farmers used a 'reverse-season' cultivating technique to achieve the autumn crop. Spring-time warmth activates the asparagus root system, which then sends up the edible spears.

While most growers harvest the vegetable at this stage, farmers at Cobrey Farm, near Ledbury, Herefordshire, let the spears grow into a bushy fern. During the summer the fern captures the sun's rays and this energy is transferred back into the plant's roots before the fern is cut back at the end of August. Poly tunnels are then placed over the cropped plant which "tricks" it into sprouting new spears in mid-September ready for harvesting in early October.

Grower Chris Chinn, who runs the 800-acre farm, has spent £2.5 million developing the autumn crop which is being sold in 150 **Marks &**

**Spencer** stores this year.

He said: "It has taken six years of trial and error but all the hard work has paid off. We grow the fern in the spring and summer and are able to harvest it in the autumn.

"This project has cost a lot of money but we're doing something revolutionary. In effect, the technique tricks the asparagus into sprouting spears in the autumn."

The new breed, which is being kept secret for commercial reasons, is described as "chunkier, sweeter and juicier" than traditional as-

paragus. Chris said last month's scorching temperatures have helped create a bumper autumn crop.

He added: "The hot weather has really helped - thanks to the climate, we were seeing asparagus grow ten inches a day. As far as we know, this crop is the latest harvest of asparagus in this country ever. The Wye Valley area is perfect too - it has light sandy soil and a micro-climate ideally suited to asparagus, which was originally a wild seashore plant. Most asparagus are northern European and Dutch varieties but our one is a Mediterranean strain, from the south of France.

"It tastes amazing - it has a tender and fresh pea-like quality, and is chunkier, sweeter

and juicier than other asparagus. As a vegetable, asparagus doesn't last very long so if we can grow it at home instead of flying it thousands

of miles from South America, it's going to be much fresher."

The British-grown strain will also reduce dependency on importing asparagus from abroad saving supermarkets up to 500 tonnes of carbon emissions every year.

The asparagus season in Britain traditionally begins on St George's Day on April 23, St George's Day, and lasts until Midsummer's Day on June 24. **Marks & Spencer** ran an initial trial last year, selling limited edition batches of Chris's autumnal asparagus in ten of its London stores. The supermarket chain is now selling this season's harvest in over 150 stores across the country.

Simon Coupe, from **Marks & Spencer**, said: "It is great that we are able to supply delicious tasting British asparagus to our customers for longer."

## £2.5m

Investment made by Herefordshire asparagus grower Chris Chinn

