Taking place on the 3 October at Farmers’ and Fletchers’, London, the Chartered Institute of Horticulture (CIH) Conference focused on Island Horticulture: Life after Brexit, looking at the varying ways in which the UK leaving the UK will and may impact on the horticultural industry.

Starting the day was **David Domoney** who discussed the positive power that plants can have on both physical and mental health, and the role that CIH members have in communicating this both inside and outside the industry.

He gave statistics such as 1 in 10 adults have not visited natural space in the past year because they are too busy, children average just 16 minutes per day in natural spaces compared to prisoners who get an hour, teenagers spend 7.5 hours per day in front of a screen and 1 in 9 children have not visited a natural space in the last year.

David says how he sees horticulture as the antidote to this technological advance. The harmonisation between horticulture and modern living can help restore the mind, increase physical exercise and aids recovery and prevents illness. Cortisol levels which are caused by stress are reduced after a 15-minute walk and will last for 72 hours, and even a 5-minute walk will help reduce this.

Next up on the agenda was **John Adlam**, **Principal at Dove Associates**, who was giving the James Bruce Memorial Lecture on ‘Growing a Horti-Culture’. He discussed how horticulture is present in everyday life, from the plants and trees along the road, flowers given as gifts, and essential oils used in perfumes. How plants can affect heatwaves, and have environmental benefits including flood control and increasing wildlife.

As an industry though, we still have some way to go to get the Government and wider society to appreciate horticulture. For example, when farmers had to destroy livestock due to foot and mouth they received compensation for it. When growers and nurseries had to destroy £1m of ash trees, there was no such compensation available. The current plant health risks pose a massive financial risk to the industry, so the lack of compensation available is a concern.

**Dr Ed Moorhouse**, **Managing Director of Agri Food Solutions**, then spoke about the challenges and opportunities for salad and vegetable growers in a post-Brexit world. He discussed how the industry is really tough, and it’s not going to get any easier. There is a lot of pressure on water, energy and food in the world. The population is increasing, and “3 meals away from anarchy” (Rousseau), and when you look at natural disasters that occur, most of the panic that occurs after them is because of the breakdown in the supply chain.

Ed believes that current challenges such as availability and cost of labour, cost and availability of inputs and sustainability and resilience are only going to get worse post Brexit. The one current challenge that has the opportunity of improving is development of innovation.

There is also the opportunity for increased usage efficiency though precision farming. This can then be developed in farming so that a field is broken down into individual sections, and then newly developed machinery can process the field in different ways depending on what the field requires.

We then moved onto **Alastair Brooks**, **Chairman of Berry Gardens**, who gave an insight into the success story of berry production in the UK. Berry Gardens’ risk register identifies the concerns post-Brexit to be labour availability, shortage of pickers, lorry drivers & middle management, issues with plant movements, tariffs and friction at borders, delayed border clearance procedures on short shelf life products, EU Programme funding (currently £6.5m pa), changes to pesticide approvals, funding for Science and Tech (Horizon 2020 gets 2.5bn euros), new rules for markets now able to access UK and the fact that the Government is currently overwhelmed by complexity of Brexit and not able to focus on other issues facing the industry.

**Jack Ward**, **Chief Executive of the British Growers Association**, spoke about capturing the opportunities that Brexit may bring, where these opportunities are and how realistic are these opportunities.

He discussed how as an industry horticulture accounts for just 3% of land area, but accounts for 25% of total agricultural output. The decisions that are made at Westminster, could have far reaching effects on the horticultural sector and consequently, Jack believes the industry needs to be mindful about what is going on and how the industry can take advantage of the complete rethink of how the UK is supporting its agricultural and horticultural economies.

Jack classified the three headline potential opportunities. The first of these is putting the fresh produce and ornamental produce on the map in a way that it has not been for a generation.

The second opportunity is around market share. We import something north of 50% of fresh produce, but he was not saying that we should aim for full self-sufficiency as that is not realistic, but as an industry could we increase our share of the UK market?

The third opportunity is around creating a connection between fresh produce and the role in which fruit and veg has could be playing in a diet and health conscious nation. Whilst this is a very complicated subject, the fact remains that increasing the consumption of fruit and vegetables has a role to play in helping the nation more to having a more balanced diet.

Jack also has an insight into two documents published recently by the Government which should be crucial in helping the industry to deliver on these opportunities. The first was its response to its health and harmony consultation, and the second was the agriculture bill itself. He then reviewed the opportunities for the fresh produce industry which emerged from those two publications.

**Jeroen Van Buren**, **Manager of Delphy Consultancy & Education**, continued the afternoon by discussing ‘Next Generation Horticulture’, and ‘Do consultants survive the digital development?’

Jeroen believes that the future demand of the grower will be less because of artificial intelligence. There will be more metropoles resulting in less arable land, more consumers resulting in less fresh water and more demand resulting in less resources available.

Fully autonomous crop growing can help combat this. Through more ‘sense’ and data you can ‘analyse’ and ‘act’ upon this. The ‘sense’ can be gained through climate sensors, crop monitoring, pest and disease detection and consumer monitoring. The ‘analyse’ can be done through sensors and robotics getting involved in horticulture from other sectors. Right now, growing is a craft and this needs to be developed so that it can be done via a machine in the future. Techniques right now such as deep learning are not accurate enough. The reason for this is the data is not efficient. This means we need to ‘act’ through automated and precise actions, looking at climate management and crop maintenance.

**Jacob Kolff**, **Managing Director of Kolff Plants in the Netherlands**, then discussed ‘UK Imports of Hardy Nursery Stock Now and in The Future’. Jacob said how customers tell him that they can get products quicker and cheaper from growers abroad than they can from a grower 30 miles down the road. This means that the industry is becoming reliant on imports, and the industry needs to change and develop to fulfil this. Essentially, this means a requirement for more labour. Brexit has meant that some foreign labour that the industry relies on no longer feels welcome here, and there will be more restrictions posed on whether they will be able to come into or stay in the country.

Jacob explained that prices will go up after Brexit because of the increase in transport costs, import taxes and exchange rates.

The last speaker of the day was **Graham Spencer**, **Director of Plants for Europe**, who spoke about Brexit - Where Are We Now and What Should You Do? Think Brexit won’t affect you as you don’t deal with imports or exports? Think again!

Reiterating a lot of the challenges mentioned throughout the day that Brexit will bring he mentioned labour, plant health, tariffs and VAT, plant variety rights, exchange rates, and the ongoing uncertainty the process is bringing.

Graham gave action points early on, suggesting that a senior person in your organisation is made responsible for Brexit monitoring and planning, and don’t bury your head in the sand; It will impact all of us. You must plan for the worst, hope for the best.

In regards of plant health, EU Plant Passports are likely to remain in place during transition. New EU legislation will be implemented in November 2019. Plant passports will be required for all material, for all operators. All ‘operators’ will need to ensure they are registered. After 31 December 2020, there will need to be inspections and phytosanitary certification for international shipments. Expect a tougher regulatory environment, and the Plant Health Regime may well end up being worse after Brexit.

Action points regarding plant health include ensuring you are up to speed with regulatory changes, think about costs (direct and indirect), talk to APHA – register for their update emails (and read them) and ensure your business is ready for new Plant Health Regulation. Check compliance, consider supply chains – Even if you think you are buying plants from the UK, where have they bought their young plants from? Have these come from the continent? The potential of delays at the docks (both sides, both directions) due to extra checks. If every lorry is going through a scanner and it takes 2 minutes, that will lead to a 30-mile queue at Dover based on research by Imperial College. Expect tighter rules on Xylella hosts and Oak Processionary Moth hosts. Increased costs and admin burden on importers and exporters will have an impact on your supply chain, even if you don’t import yourself.

**Gerald Bonner** then brought the day to a close, rounding up the key points of the day and highlighting the uncertainty the industry faces, and the importance of working together to ensure support and education is shared where possible.