



"I've always used seaweed," said Simon Foad, the farms manager, who arrived at Highland Investment three years ago. "The farms did use seaweed a bit but I have increased its usage."

Production has increased during Mr Foad's three years at Highland Investment. One of the reasons for this has been attention to husbandry, and Mr Foad's preference for mixing Chase SM6 liquid seaweed with chemicals used on all the crops, including the top fruit. "I think it has a buffering effect on some of the harsher chemicals. So we don't see scorch, for example, when we use a product such as sulphur. It can reduce the phytotoxic effects."

Spread over five farms in Kent, Highland Investment has 1,100 acres in total, of which 500 acres is down to fruit. The rest is either woodland or grassland with about 500 acres occupied by arable farming tenants. Cox is the main apple, and there are pears, plums, cherries, blackcurrants, and, most unusually, apricots.

If climate change is happening, apricots should be suited to the conditions, and Highland Investment is probably the only grower in the country. The flowers were budding in late January, and Mr Foad said the fruit were averaging 55mm and were nothing like the dry, tasteless apricots sold in supermarkets. "We have had crops averaging four tonnes to the acre over the last two years, which is pretty good. We have a site where we are planning to grow some more."

Early on this season, one of three farms growing top fruit was hit by hail, and the entire Cox acreage at Bridge was lost and 3,000 bins had to go for juice. "The poor

## Seaweed spray helps protect crops

Using a liquid seaweed mix has helped to lessen scorching from some of the harsher chemicals applied on crops at Highland Investment farms around Bridge in Kent.

prices which other growers suffered later on this season have not really affected us," said Mr Foad. "We managed to fill all our stores from the other two farms and we are happy with the prices we've been having."

Through Worldwide Fruits, Highland Investment supplies Tesco, with some fruit going to Sainsbury's. "We do quite a lot of business with R S Fruits to the wholesale markets across the country and have achieved good prices with them," Mr Foad added.

There are 300 acres of top fruit, 85% of which is Cox. The rest is a little Bramley, Gala, Russet, Discovery, Braeburn, Worcester and pears. On an average year, the three top fruit farms together produce 4,250 bins of Cox a year and a total of 7500 bins of top fruit.

With 220 acres of blackcurrants, Highland Investment is one of the largest producers in the country and has a contract with Glaxo Smith Kline.

Walnuts are grown for timber and nuts. The walnut trees have been in the ground for three years, and were two years old when they came to Highland Court. "We

are hoping to have a light crop off them this year," said Mr Foad. Four acres have been planted for nuts, and two for timber: the timber is an experimental idea, which involves keeping a photographic record of tree growth for the first seven years.

Eventually, Mr Foad wants to send the wood to specialist markets with its life history and photographs. Highland Investment is a family owned business run by a board with Ian Johnston as managing director. Among all the enterprises, there is a pick your own unit on one of the company farms, which is mainly soft fruit but there are also 10 acres of cherries.

Grass across the farms is managed for wildlife. "Mr Johnston is very keen on shooting and conservation and is keen to increase the English partridge numbers on the farms," Mr Foad explained. "We have many management practices on the farm which are designed to encourage game birds." For example, for years there have been unown two metre strips round all the windbreaks. Corners of land are left alone and special seed mixtures and covers are sown to encourage wild birds.