# Place UK leads digital revolution in British fruit farming



Technological innovation is transforming British fruit farming, with companies like Place UK at the forefront of a digital shift designed to boost efficiency, sustainability and labour resilience. The Norfolk-based fruit producer, manufacturer and co-packer has adopted a suite of agri-tech solutions to overcome long-standing challenges and secure the future of UK berry production.

Dan Yordanov, Head of Fresh at Place UK, said the impact of technology in the past few years has been “profound.” Precision irrigation, automation and AI-driven forecasting now streamline operations while easing reliance on physical labour. “Labour still accounts for the majority of crop-growing costs, so reducing our reliance on it is essential,” he told *Food Manufacture*.

The UK Food Security Report 2024 notes that labour costs make up more than 40% of horticultural production expenses, rising by over 24% in two years. Barriers such as short-term contracts, rural isolation and housing costs continue to exacerbate workforce shortages—prompting farmers to turn to automation.

Place UK has invested heavily in infrastructure, including a £1.1 million irrigation reservoir near Neatishead built in partnership with neighbouring farms. Equivalent to more than 100 Olympic swimming pools, it feeds into fertigation systems remotely managed via mobile apps, giving growers full control of water and nutrients without daily site visits.

The company is also pioneering sustainable crop protection through autonomous UV robots that treat strawberry plants for mildew overnight. Developed in Norway, the machines emit shortwave light bursts to suppress fungi, reducing pesticide use and allowing daytime operations to continue uninterrupted. Yordanov said the initiative has reshaped how farms are designed, with layouts now planned to accommodate autonomous machinery.

AI forecasting is another key innovation. Using camera-based systems, the FruitCast platform analyses crop health and predicts harvest yields with remarkable precision. “FruitCast has transformed this part of our operations,” said Yordanov. “We get automated, real-time insights that also consider weather forecasts.” In processing, Operations Director Dean Mayhew is leading incremental automation to improve output, from dynamic conveyor controls to advanced sealing systems. These upgrades optimise efficiency while preserving flexibility—crucial for bespoke product runs. “Automation supports our people rather than replacing them,” he said.

Trials of Fieldwork Robotics’ autonomous raspberry picker are equally promising. The AI-powered machine mimics a gecko’s gentle touch to identify and harvest ripe berries, complementing human pickers who still handle around 30–40% of fruit. Mayhew emphasised that technology is there to enhance, not replace, skilled expertise.

Labour shortages remain a critical issue. The National Farmers Union estimates that £22 million of produce was lost to workforce shortages in the first half of 2022 alone. Government efforts to extend the seasonal worker visa scheme until 2029 and provide £50 million for automation are intended to ease the strain and encourage domestic recruitment.

Place UK’s technology strategy centres on collaboration with agri-tech innovators, acting as a testbed for new tools under flexible funding models such as subscription-based robotics. Each investment is assessed across productivity, quality, cost, environmental impact and worker wellbeing.

Looking ahead, the company is exploring robotic transport systems to automate fruit movement from field to packhouse, moving closer to fully integrated production. Yet leadership remains clear that people remain at the heart of the operation. “Automation will improve efficiency and reduce wastage, but people remain vital for quality control and decision-making,” said Mayhew.

By combining human expertise with cutting-edge technology, Place UK is helping define a new era of responsible fruit farming—one that strengthens the UK’s resilience, sustainability and reputation for agricultural innovation.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Article/2025/10/07/how-place-uk-is-revolutionising-fruit-farming-with-agri-tech-and-automation/?utm_source=RSS_Feed&utm_medium=RSS&utm_campaign=RSS> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Article/2025/10/07/how-place-uk-is-revolutionising-fruit-farming-with-agri-tech-and-automation/?utm_source=RSS_Feed&utm_medium=RSS&utm_campaign=RSS> - This article discusses how Place UK, a company specialising in manufacturing, co-packing, and supplying fresh and frozen fruit ingredients, is embracing technological innovations to transform British fruit farming. Over the past three to four years, Place UK has implemented advancements such as precision irrigation and harvest forecasting, making fruit farming faster, more efficient, and less reliant on manual tasks. The shift towards automation and robotics is driven by challenges like labour shortages and rising costs, with automation being key to securing the future of British berry farming.
3. <https://www.fruitandvine.co.uk/early-career-professionals-learn-about-future-of-british-fruit-farming/> - In June 2025, Place UK hosted a delegation of early-career professionals in research, agronomy, and agricultural consultancy to discuss the future of British fruit farming. The event, organised by Agri-TechE, focused on topics such as robotics, automation, adoption of the latest agri-tech, and sustainable fruit farming practices. This initiative highlights Place UK's commitment to integrating advanced technologies and fostering collaboration to enhance the UK's fruit farming industry.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2024-theme-3-food-supply-chain-resilience> - The UK Food Security Report 2024 highlights that labour accounts for over 40% of overall production costs in the horticulture sector, with a two-year compound increase of 24.3%. The report also notes challenges in attracting British workers due to the short-term, physical, and repetitive nature of the work, as well as rural location issues like poor public transport and lack of affordable housing. These factors contribute to heightened risks of food waste and the potential for production to move overseas.
5. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/rising-energy-costs-and-long-term-price-pressures-most-likely-be-seen-causes-fruit-and-vegetables-shortages> - Research by Ipsos indicates that rising energy costs and long-term price pressures on UK farmers are significant contributors to current fruit and vegetable shortages. Approximately 76% of respondents believe rising energy costs have contributed a great deal or fair amount to these shortages, while 73% attribute it to long-term price pressures. Other factors include climate change, agricultural labour shortages, and the UK's departure from the EU.
6. <https://www.foodmanufacture.co.uk/Article/2022/08/17/are-labour-shortages-creating-wasted-fruit-and-veg/> - A survey by the National Farmers Union (NFU) reveals that the UK labour crisis has led to over £60 million worth of fruit and vegetables being wasted. The survey found that £22 million worth of produce was wasted directly due to workforce shortages in the first half of 2022 alone. This underscores the detrimental impact of labour shortages on the food and farming sector, resulting in significant crop losses amid a severe cost-of-living crisis.
7. <https://www.fruitandvine.co.uk/governments-long-term-plans-for-labour-needs/> - The UK government has announced plans to address labour shortages in the food supply chain by extending the seasonal worker visa route until 2029, providing up to £50 million in funding for new technology to support fully automated packhouses, and developing a comprehensive strategy to enhance skills provision and attract domestic workers. These measures aim to reduce reliance on migrant labour and support the adoption of automation in the sector.