

CAMBRIDGE ORGANIC GAZETTE

courgette



From Cambridge fields
to college forks in
under 20 miles!

Standing tall with trees
and 'who's hungry?'





A word from Dean

Chief Executive of Cambridge Organic

One of our biggest annual challenges is the so-called 'hungry gap', which occurs from March to May every year, when winter crops run out and before the new season ones are ready. On top of that, this year we've got extreme rainfall and flooding across the growing regions of southern Europe to contend with. It's a mixed picture beautifully illustrated by David's piece opposite.

Further, all the transporters are raising their costs in response to the oil shortages caused by the crisis in the Strait of Hormuz. It's interesting to hear how the situation affects the supply of fertilizer too, as so much of it is made from bi-products of oil production and is therefore dependent on the same trade route. The knock-on effect of these increased costs take time to percolate through the supply chain, however, it's fair to predict that food costs will rise throughout the year. I suppose there's a small relief that our organic food is only subject to the transport element and its non-organic agriculture that will be mostly affected by a fertilizer shortage.

We're also excited to be supplying fresh produce to Hughes Hall (University of Cambridge) Green Week event, where they will be serving a menu with ingredients sourced from a 20-mile radius. This is an initiative by The Centre for Climate Engagement which is based there. Read more in the article by Alice.

The experience gained through actually going ahead and supplying food directly to the college is going to be incredibly valuable. It is a significant step forward in terms of our goal of setting up infrastructure that will make it possible for much more local and sustainably produced food to be supplied to local schools, hospitals and colleges in the future.



Mind The Gap

Therfield Heath, on the outskirts of Royston, boasts the finest collection of prehistoric barrows in East Anglia. It's also home to a pretty diverse range of chalkland flowers. There aren't many wildflowers to be seen at this time of year, but if you park near the sports club and follow the path westwards, you'll pass a clump of fresh-looking green leaves. These are Alexanders. They are edible, but we are not sourcing them for our veg boxes! The plant was brought over by the Romans as a spring vegetable and has now naturalised. Guidebooks say that the leaves taste like myrrh, which is only useful to those of us who know what myrrh tastes like, but I have nibbled on the leaves, and I think they do taste like incense smells. I think the reason the Romans went to the trouble of growing such a strange-tasting plant was that there is so little which can be harvested and eaten fresh at this time of year.



We are entering the months which are traditionally called 'the hungry gap', the time when winter's brassicas have gone to seed and the stored roots of winter are either all eaten or shrivelled. And while the days are getting warmer, most crops are still being sown, or if already planted, then they are still growing to a stage where we can eat them. It's a frustrating time for us, because as spring progresses, the countryside seems at its most verdant, while we still don't have a lot of local produce to put in the boxes. The disconnect between all the trees budding, the blossom blooming and the hedges overspilling with new life on one side and the lack of local produce to put in our boxes is an annual heartache.

Of course, in the twenty-first century, the hungry gap has very little effect on the fruit and vegetables we see on our supermarket shelves: they display much the same range throughout the year and merely switch which continent they source their raspberries and tenderstem broccoli from. Even for us, things have changed quite a bit since Roman times!



Polytunnels have brought forward the harvest of greens which wouldn't grow in the cold soils outside. This year, it's hard to avoid the impact that the climate emergency is having on our food. While previously, produce from Spain helped fill our boxes in these difficult months, this spring, climate chaos has led to flooding in Spain that has completely wiped out many crops. In the meantime, local growers are contacting us saying that their spring crops are several weeks ahead of usual; we've already had rhubarb from Brownsfield Farm a month earlier than last year. As the climate changes, is the hungry gap closing?

Written by David Booth

From field to fork in 20 miles

Catering for local: an exploration of connectivity, seasonality, and food security. Alice Guillaume, Buyer for Cambridge Organic

One weekend in mid March (when I shouldn't have been looking at work WhatsApp messages, but was anyway) I received a flurry of contacts from local growers.

"We have lots of rhubarb available and it looks great. It's getting earlier every year!"

"I know it's very late notice, but would you like some salad and spinach? The glorious weather last week did us a massive favour."

The news, whilst it meant some last-minute planning, was welcome for two reasons.



"First, many of our students come to the UK for the very first time, and they're often unaware of the incredible range of ingredients grown right here in our region, sometimes just a few miles from the College. Second, Cambridgeshire has a unique agricultural identity. As a largely fenland county, it's one of the most productive areas in the country, and we're proud to showcase the quality and character of the food grown on our doorstep."

'Procurement for Good' which, led by Coventry University, aims to increase the amount of sustainable and locally produced food used by public institutions.

Whilst you may jump to the environmental benefits of local produce – lower food miles are surely better? – it's not always the most important aspect of food's carbon footprint. How food is produced – such as in heated greenhouses – can have a much greater impact. This means that when we

emphasise buying local, we always also ensure the produce is in season and is sustainably produced (all our produce is organic). And there are other benefits of buying locally beyond the environmental. It can also increase our connectivity to our food and plays a role in establishing local identities. This was highlighted by Mark Harrison, Head of Domestic Operations at Hughes Hall, when he explained to me the main reasons they had for wanting to focus on local:

Catering with local produce meant facing the challenge of seasonality. Unlike the summer and autumn months, we do not currently have a reliable offering from our local growers, many of whom are small. Looking at previous years, I could see in advance that we might have some variety to offer (mainly brassicas and leafy greens), but there remained a lot of uncertainty. If the weather had been different, we could have had little to nothing to offer, rather

MENU

LOCALLY SOURCED GREEN WEEK FORMAL HALL MENU
TUESDAY 17TH MARCH 2026

STARTER

Roasted celeriac & truffle soup 

(Celeriac grown within 10 mile of the college)

MAIN

Lentil, spinach & kale medallion

with sautéed cabbage, purple sprouting broccoli and leek sauce 

(Spinach, kale and purple sprouting all grown within

20 miles of the college)

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Braised pork belly

with potato fondant, parsnip purée, sautéed cabbage and pork jus

(Pork, parsnips, potatoes and cabbages all grown

within 20 miles of the college)

DESSERT

Apple & rhubarb oat crumble

with rhubarb ice-cream 

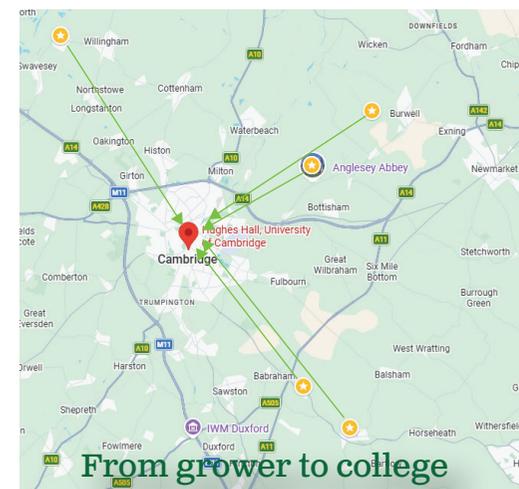
(Rhubarb grown within 10 miles of the college)

Firstly, we had recently been asked to help cater for a food event hosted by Hughes Hall, Cambridge University. The event, held as part of their Green Week, sought to source all produce from within 20 miles of the college. This arrangement came about as part of our involvement in a research project called



Purple Sprouting Broccoli from the fields of Waterland CSA in Lode to Hughes College fork in Cambridge

 Suitable for Vegan diets  Suitable for Vegetarian diets



than a plentiful selection. In the end, we sourced produce from six local suppliers, including leeks and celeriac from Flourish Produce in Linton, chard from Waterland CSA in Lode, and rhubarb from Brownsfield Farm in Over.

This brings me to the second reason I was happy, if a little surprised, to receive a lovely offering of local produce.

In the UK, we are approaching the time of year called the 'Hungry Gap'. This is when British winter crops and stored staples (such as apples, pears, carrots and onions) are ending, but before the new season produce is harvested. So, whilst as a box scheme, we prioritise local



Avocado field photo sent by our Spanish growers in February

in our buying, as a country we increasingly rely on imported produce at this time of year.

And that has been difficult this year. Spain, a primary supplier of fresh produce to the UK, has experienced exceptionally wet weather, with parts of the country seeing a year's worth of rain over 20 days in February. Whilst news outlets have described it as 'unprecedented', studies have shown that climate change made similar flooding in 2024 in Valencia more deadly, so we can only assume that this extreme, unpredictable weather will become more common over time.

The impact on food production has been significant. "Unfortunately, the bad weather and the recent storms have made it very difficult to have stable product availability," one of our suppliers told us. Other suppliers showed us photos of flooded fields, lost harvests, and warned that it might affect the availability of certain produce later in the year.

A decrease in availability has led to increasing prices. In the past weeks, this has been compounded by the effects of conflict in the Middle East. Food production, like most industries, relies heavily on oil. Whilst all our suppliers are organic, and therefore often less reliant, they still suffer knock-on effects when oil prices rise. For example, Russia's invasion of Ukraine four years ago similarly lead to higher oil prices, increasing the cost of synthetic fertilisers. Organic growers don't use such fertilisers, but saw manure also rise in price as it became commercialised as an alternative.

Availability constraints mean we can't procure all the vegetables we need just from our local growers, especially at this time of year. But all of this is to say; it was a relief to hear that production was going well for them, and that they could provide some variety for our boxes.

Eating local can connect you to your food and your local area's identity; it supports local growers; and, where combined with seasonal and sustainable production, brings

environmental benefits. However, focusing on solely local eating is not simple. At certain times of year – and in certain geographical regions (we don't all live in the productive fens!) – you're very limited by what's available. Whatever the season, you face potential uncertainty depending on factors outside of your control.

Buying globally has, in many ways, increased the reliability and variety of the produce we can consume. But our food system is complex. Events thousands of miles away from us have huge impacts on the price and availability of our food. And wherever they are in the world, growers are at the mercy of an increasingly unpredictable climate. Sometimes, as we saw recently with our local growers, this brings unexpected boons. Other times, as in Spain, it can destroy harvests.

Wherever you get your food from, we should be grateful to the people who grow it. The journey from field to fork is not a simple one!



Local produce sourced for our Hughes Hall event in March 2026

Five reasons we love the nine 10-foot tall trees planted around Cambridge so far, thanks to the combined support of our customers – and why we think we should plant even more!

1. **They capture carbon** – a 10-foot tree can absorb around 10–25kg of CO₂ every year, helping reduce greenhouse gases as it continues to grow.
2. **They produce oxygen** – a single mature tree produces approximately 120kg of oxygen per year. That means two mature trees can supply enough oxygen annually to support a family of four.
3. **They clean the air** – leaves and bark naturally filter pollutants like dust, smoke and harmful gases from the atmosphere.
4. **They manage rainwater** – a single tree can help intercept thousands of gallons of rainfall each year, reducing pressure on city drains and helping to prevent flooding.
5. **They cool our city** – trees provide shade and release moisture into the air, helping lower urban temperatures and make our neighbourhoods more comfortable.

Join the campaign and help us plant more trees by donating through your veg box at cambridgeorganic.co.uk under 'add items to your order'. See all What3Words locations online too and go visit the trees!



Jesus Green

///mild.races.privately



Chesterton

///dome.putty.shared



Arbury

///expose.blitz.tunnel

We are running this campaign in partnership with Trees For Streets; a UK-based national charity-backed initiative that helps residents and businesses sponsor the planting of new trees in local streets and parks.

