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Non Food Uses of Crops

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INTRODUCTION

Research into the exploitation of so-called ‘novel crops’ and ‘non-food crops’ received a boost in the late 1980s and 1990s. This interest occurred as food surpluses and the introduction of set-aside land led to a desire by policymakers in Europe to find new enterprises for farmers based on growing ‘alternative’ crops. Early work in the UK focussed on field experimentation and demonstration activities for crops which were deemed to be of interest, and for which literature, and/or industry indicated there might be commercial opportunities. However research into crop production and agronomy alone did not address the fundamental problems that the chosen crops and their products, were not meeting end-user requirements, or that the markets were not there in the first place. Hence in the early 2000s there was a switch in government funding more towards supply chain development and meeting market requirements, and agronomic studies took something of a back seat. However there has been a growing realisation in recent years, that growing practices are still important. This is partly because of the low yields of many alternative crops (as well as low contents of the component of interest as a proportion of total biomass) and partly because of the added focus given by targets for biofuel production within Europe, as we approached 2010. There has been a growing appreciation that a large part of the greenhouse gas costs of producing crops, and factors such as yield of biomass per hectare and the levels of agronomic inputs are key to minimising the carbon footprint of renewable raw materials. Thus, while markets are of course critical, additionally, inputs, land use, and crop productivity are all areas which need to be optimised. These are all areas of interest to applied biologists. This conference provided an opportunity for those engaged in development of markets for renewable materials and energy, the agronomy and physiology of crop plants and those with an interest in the environmental impacts of crop production, to hear about the research and policies affecting development of novel and conventional crops, for non food uses.

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
The development of non-food crops - the long road from high values to mainstream energy J TOMKINSON and L DOMMETT	1–8
Biofuels: Their impact on crop production world wide B E A KNIGHT	9–16
Optimisation of supply and energetic use of biomass from representative grassland types in Germany (GNUT-project) K GÖDEKE	17–24
Uses of renewable materials as low-carbon solutions for building construction P WALKER, K BEADLE, M LAWRENCE, K PAINE and E HIRST	25–30
Nitrate leaching losses from <i>Miscanthus</i> × <i>giganteus</i> impact on groundwater quality E M CURLEY, M G O' FLYNN and K P MCDONNELL	31–36
Low nitrogen input cereals for bioethanol production D R KINDRED, R M WEIGHTMAN, S ROQUES and R SYLVESTER-BRADLEY	37–44
The future for fibre crops RAY HARWOOD	45–54
Yield and properties of fibre from linseed straw M R L HORNE	55–61
The use of oilseed rape (<i>Brassica napus</i>) straw for combustion purposes: a review of the advantages and disadvantages L CHICO-SANTAMARTA, A HUMPHRIES, D WHITE, K CHANEY and R J GODWIN	63–69
Market opportunities from the separation of biomass components T C SMITH and A HIGSON	71–78
High-sugar perennial ryegrass as a feed-stock for bioconversion to platform chemicals A L WINTERS, D LEEMANS, S M MORRIS, J PIPPEL, A LOVATT, A CHARLTON and J GALLAGHER	79–86
Biorefining of ryegrass for fibre production in Northern Ireland H S SHEKHAR SHARMA, GARY LYONS, COLIN McROBERTS and MIKE CAMLIN	87–88
Acid pre-treatment and enzymatic hydrolysis of rapeseed straw for bioethanol production A K MATHEW, A C HUMPHRIES, K CHANEY and M CROOK	89–95
Development of cannabis as a prescription medicine BRIAN WHITTLE, ETIENNE de MEYER and DAVID POTTER	97–98

Developing an alternative UK industrial crop <i>Artemisia annua</i>, for the extraction of Artemisinin to treat multi-drug resistant malaria LYDIA M J SMITH, S BENTLEY, HUW JONES, CORRINNE BURNS, RANDOLPH R J AROO and J G WOOLLEY	99–106
Concentrations of ingenol esters and biomass yields of <i>Euphorbia peplus</i> L. during growth: Effects of sowing date and establishment method R M WEIGHTMAN, M BEAUDET, H GREENLEAVES and J S DAVIES	107–114
Developing sweet gale (<i>Myrica gale</i>) as a new crop for the cosmetics industry P MARTIN and X CHANG	115–122
The agricultural production of woad and the derivation of indigo IAN HOWARD	123–126
 <i>Posters</i>	
Short-fibre hemp for high value textiles M R L HORNE	127–132
Cultivating stinging nettle (<i>Urtica dioica</i>) for fibre production in the UK J HARWOOD, M R L HORNE and D WALDRON	133–138
The environmental impact of production of biofuels from biomass ANNA ARONSSON and ANDREA HUMPHRIES	139–144
Biogas and methane yields from perennial rye grass (<i>Lolium perenne</i>) in dependence on the fraction of obtusifolious sorrel (<i>Rumex obtusifolius</i>) K GÖDEKE, F HENGELHAUPT and H HOCHBERG	145–148
Production of Marsh Mallow (<i>Althaea officinalis</i>) roots in a hydroponic system as a source of ingredients for personal care products R M WEIGHTMAN, H GREENLEAVES and T M O VERHOEVEN	149–154
Effects of fertiliser nitrogen and variety on the concentrations of non-starch polysaccharides in winter wheat for alcohol production H DAVIS-KNIGHT, R M WEIGHTMAN ¹ , R AGU, T BRINGHURST and J BROSANAN	155–162