

Case Study

Contract Research: Soft Fruit Technology Group



Key Facts

- The Soft Fruit Technology Group (SFTG) is a unique initiative offering scientific research opportunities to the sector. It is a vehicle for near market research which responds to actual needs in the market.
- Core activities within the SFTG are managed by Dr Evangelos Tsormpatzidis, Professor Paul Hadley and Professor Nick Battey.
- Members include Farm Advisory Services Team Ltd (FAST), which provides advice to over 150 fruit growers, and Edward Vinson Ltd, a major UK soft fruit producer, breeder and propagator.
- Research programmes are designed in consultation with SFTG members. The SFTG also undertakes contract research projects commissioned by individuals or consortia.
- The work of the SFTG has covered a diverse range of topics from determining the effect of chilling in cherries, raspberries and strawberries to investigating practical production issues such as the double cropping of raspberries and thermodormancy in strawberries.
- Current work is focused on improving the understanding of physiological responses in everbearing strawberries to allow long season production of some exciting new varieties

Industrial Partner

The Farm Advisory Services Team Ltd (FAST) is an advisory body specialising in all aspects of planting and growing top fruit and soft fruit. Established in 1981 in Kent, one of the UK's main fruit growing areas, today FAST covers all the UK from three centres in Faversham, Kent; Woodbridge, Suffolk and Ledbury, Herefordshire.

FAST provides progressive commercial advice through a team of advisers, with differing backgrounds and skills to their clients, and recognises that every grower has individual requirements. FAST's day to day advice is backed up by a full range of analytical laboratory services and a comprehensive programme of trials, development projects and training.

The Challenge

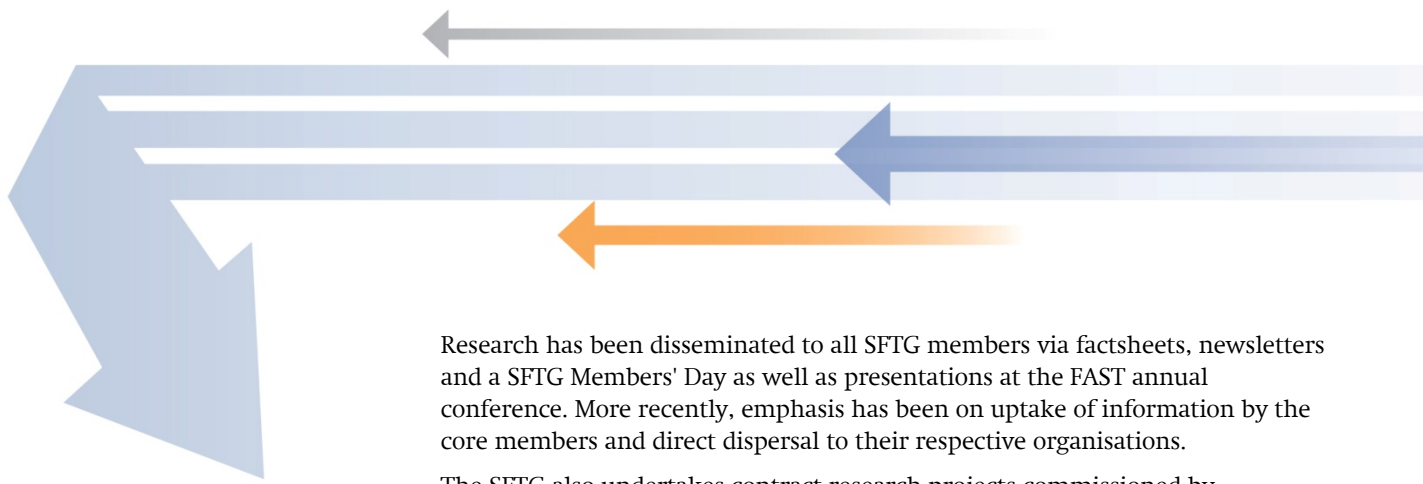
There was a recognised demand from within the soft fruit sector for technology based research and development that was responsive to market needs. However, many critical issues had not been addressed because of the lack of facilities and funding resulting from the fragmented nature of the sector.

Although there are national bodies that members of the soft fruit sector could belong to, it was felt more control over research could be achieved if they had direct interaction with a university and could thereby be involved in the direction of research at all stages. FAST, on behalf of the soft fruit sector, approached the Horticulture section at the University of Reading because of its world leading reputation in this field.

Solution

The Soft Fruit Technology Group (SFTG) at the University of Reading was set up in direct response to demand. By 1997 it had become a formal arrangement supported by three industry partners in conjunction with the University. The SFTG is a unique initiative offering scientific research opportunities to the sector. It is a vehicle for near market research which responds to actual needs in the market.

Since the group began a number of industry partners have provided core funding, of which FAST has been the longest running. Since October 2008 Edward Vinson Ltd, a major UK soft fruit producer, breeder and propagator, has been a core member.



Research has been disseminated to all SFTG members via factsheets, newsletters and a SFTG Members' Day as well as presentations at the FAST annual conference. More recently, emphasis has been on uptake of information by the core members and direct dispersal to their respective organisations.

The SFTG also undertakes contract research projects commissioned by individuals or consortia. Collaborations have led to PhD students funded by Marks & Spencer, Syngenta, British Polythene Industries, and GlaxoSmithKline. SFTG has also been successful in gaining funding from Defra and the Horticultural Development Company.



'The SFTG at the University of Reading is invaluable in helping us to improve the economic production of soft fruit crops. It does this by providing access to a huge reservoir of scientific knowledge, combined with excellent and cost effective research capabilities.'

John Handford
Director, FAST Ltd

Benefits to the Industrial Partners

The work of the SFTG is focused on the science which underpins the development of agronomic methods for soft fruit crops. This allows more efficient, cost effective crop management for a range of production systems. The benefits to members include increased competitive advantage and opportunities for innovation.

Members of the SFTG have access to a multi-disciplinary team at the University incorporating different Schools and resources, such as laboratory facilities and controlled environment rooms. This offers flexibility and excellence across an extended range of disciplines.

Benefits to the University

Interaction with members of the SFTG has provided considerable benefits to the University's reputation, including an industry focus for a large number of PhD, MSc and BSc projects over the past 17 years. UK and international students have benefited from the input of the industry sponsors and SFTG funding has attracted support in the form of other grants, such as a £1 million Hort-LINK award from Defra. The SFTG members have also provided sponsorship for undergraduate students in the form of bursaries.

Further opportunities have been created for the University through interaction with FAST, such as winning curation and maintenance of the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale in Kent.

University of Reading

The University of Reading is a world-class research-intensive university covering a broad spectrum of disciplines across the Life and Physical Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences and Henley Business School. Areas of particular strength include: Climate Systems Science, Preventative and Therapeutic Health Sciences, Sustainable Construction and Environments and Computational Science and Informatics.

The University works with businesses providing support for research and development, as well as access to expertise and equipment to solve business challenges. To find out how you can access the leading minds at the University of Reading please contact our Knowledge Transfer Centre.