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Soil additive could boost output by 30pc

Mark Keenan

IRELAND'S expanding soft fruit export sector is set for a multimillion euro boost if claims for a new Irish product turn out to be true, says Teagasc.

The eco-friendly product – which growers say increases food production by 30pc – may also have big implications in the forestry and vegetable sectors where weevils and larvae cause massive losses.

SuperNemos, a new type of bio pest cure invented in a garden shed in Arklow, could revolutionise the production of strawberries and raspberries worldwide, say Irish growers who have already trialed the product.

They say the product has almost completely eliminated costly wipe-outs caused by the hugely destructive vine weevil for which previously there was no permissible treatment.

“We’ve done preliminary tests on this product which seems to be based on combining different nematode strains and they are certainly encouraging. It has potential to be massively important for the Irish soft fruit sector which is already ahead of its competitors in other European countries thanks to improved technologies but it needs to undergo comprehensive and independently controlled tests first,” said Teagasc’s Michael Gaffney.

“Vine weevils are particularly resilient and destructive pests. One female can produce up to a thousand eggs and five of these can account for 21 grams of fruit. There are indications that this product may also have a far wider application, against pests which devour certain vegetables and even for the forestry sector where the pine weevil is rampant. This product could be picked up by one of the big world companies like BASF or Becker Underwood.” SuperNemos was invented by Wicklow-based Iraqi-born microbiologist Dr Abdul Al Amidi in his garden shed in 2006. The product is a soil drench infused with millions of nematodes, naturally occurring tiny predators which feed on vine weevils. The latter are immensely destructive pests which can wipe out an entire strawberry plantation in one go. It is also effective against other profit-munching market garden pests like wire worms, caterpillars and carrot fly.

Nematode treatments have been around for some years

but with erratic results. The Wicklow-based amateur microbiologist has also discovered and patented a method of “supercharging” normal nematodes to continue feeding long after normal strains which tend to go dormant once they’ve fed a certain amount. The product is also completely eco friendly, a major plus for the food sector.

The company is owned by Dr Abdul Al Amidi, the inventor, and marketing manager Ciaran Walsh who have been working since 2006 to trial and distribute the product.

LOSSES

James Kearns, the chairman of the Irish Soft Fruit Grower’s Association added: “Before this product we were regularly looking at huge losses. In a bad year you could lose almost all of your crops.

“At a time when supermarkets are looking for an extra pound of fruit for the same price every year, it means that the SuperNemos could now keep a lot of people in business. Over three years our success rate is almost 100pc.

“About half of serious growers now use it today. Two years ago that was just 5pc but I expect usage to be almost 100pc in another two years.”

The product has also been increasing yields for wholesale plant operations like the O’Connor nursery in Gorey, who grow 30,000 to 60,000 Christmas poinsettias each year and reckon **the product has saved 15pc of stock annuals.**

