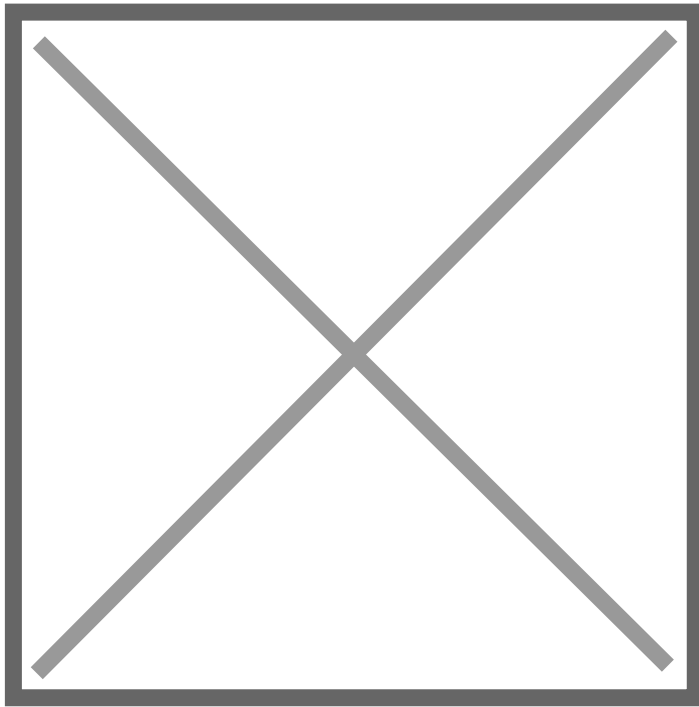


## Building sustainable defence against currant-lettuce aphid in iceberg lettuce

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**Jantine Heemskerk, Managing Director of Heemskerk Fresh & Easy**



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The currant-lettuce aphid has become one of the most persistent challenges in iceberg lettuce production, threatening crop quality, shelf life and consumer confidence across the fresh produce value chain. With tighter restrictions on crop protection products and rising expectations around sustainability, growers, processors and retailers are under increasing pressure to find effective long-term solutions. In this interview, Jantine Heemskerk, Managing Director of Heemskerk Fresh & Easy, discusses the growing impact of aphid infestations, the role of resistant varieties developed by Rijk Zwaan, and how collaboration across the chain will be critical to safeguarding quality, reducing pesticide use and building a more sustainable future for iceberg lettuce.

**How important is iceberg lettuce in your overall assortment?**

“Iceberg lettuce is one of our biggest lines. It’s important in both our retail and food service ranges. We use it in more than 30 different pre-packed salads and other end products. Its crunchiness and fresh flavour make iceberg lettuce a tasty ingredient.”

**Does the currant-lettuce aphid pose a problem when processing iceberg lettuce?**

â??Definitely. Our washing process is very thorough, but we canâ??t guarantee 100 per cent success. Even low numbers of aphids in pre-packed products are not acceptable to customers. Moreover, if an aphid has fed on the leaves, it negatively impacts the quality and shelf life of the lettuce.â?•

**Restrictions on the use of crop protection agents make it hard to control the currant-lettuce aphid. Whatâ??s your take on this?**

â??Our growers are facing major challenges. We believe that reducing the use of pesticides is the right way forward, but this strategy must be pursued effectively and at the right pace. Less spraying puts harvest volumes and quality under pressure, which ultimately affects the entire fresh value chain. This is a cause for concern for us. We see this as a shared task for breeders, growers, chain partners, consumers and also governments.â?•

**Can Rijk Zwaanâ??s varieties with resistance against the currant-lettuce aphid play a part in a sustainable solution?**

â??Yes, we see resistant varieties as a significant and promising step, provided that other essential traits and resistances are retained. In the meantime, we are not sitting still; weâ??re looking at ways to improve our washing process. So we are approaching this challenge from two angles.â?•

**What else is necessary, in your view?**

â??The new varieties just need to prove themselves in the coming months. Letâ??s focus on effective crop guidance and monitoring, sharing knowledge in the fresh value chain, and getting all chain partners to the table to develop a joint vision on breeding.â?•

**How important is sustainability for your company?**

â??For us, sustainability is not an afterthought. Itâ??s a key prerequisite for being futureproof. By minimising our use of water, energy and raw materials, we save costs and reduce waste while still maintaining the high quality of our products. At the same time, a focus on sustainability strengthens our relationship with growers, customers and retailers. They have ever-higher expectations in terms of responsible food production.â?•