

The largest organic vegetable producer in the Netherlands has been bought by The Fruit Farm Group (TFFG), an entity created three years ago by the shareholders of Belgian-headquartered produce multinational Univeg.



Belgian entrepreneur Hein Deprez, a major shareholder of TFFG's parent company, and AC Hartman owner, Wim Hartman, signed an agreement under which all of the AC Hartman shares were acquired.

Deprez heads a group of companies operating fruit plantations in numerous countries and is the major shareholder of produce company Greenyard.

The companies have not revealed the financial details of the deal but emphasize the takeover will allow AC Hartman to grow and become more sustainable, particularly through a project involving terrestrial heat technologies used in a glasshouse expansion project in the Netherlands.

AC Hartman has 72 hectares of horticultural land in the northern Dutch village of Sexbierum which will be expanded to 110 hectares over the next few years making it one of the Netherlands' largest glasshouse horticultural companies.

Currently it supplies supermarket chain Albert Heijn as well as fruit and vegetable company Bakker Barendrecht with organically grown cucumbers, sweet peppers, sweet pointed peppers, chilli peppers, aubergines, cherry tomatoes and vine tomatoes.

According to TFFG, in order to meet the increase in demand for sustainable organic greenhouse vegetables, the existing acreage is being converted as much as possible into organic land with the new acreage being used for conventional and organic glasshouse horticulture.

AC Hartman has also purchased 50 hectares of farmland in agreement with the Waddenglas project, a joint initiative involving the municipality of Franekeradeel, the province of Friesland and the Netherlands Enterprise Agency.

Rob Bal, CEO of AC Hartman, welcomes the takeover.

"I'm grateful for the opportunity to start a new chapter in the life's work of Wim Hartman, the driving force behind AC Hartman. Wim has always maintained a good business and personal relationship with Hein Deprez because he feels very strongly about the environment, health, sustainability and human values," he says.

"The takeover of AC Hartman by Deprez's The Fruit Farm Group is a rational step and gives AC Hartman a fantastic opportunity to continue to grow and invest in innovative production methods for organic vegetables."

Heat from the earth helps create sustainable veggies

As part of the new project, AC Hartman's greenhouses will be heated with geothermal energy - heat energy generated and stored in the earth.

A three kilometre deep well will be bored into the ground in the Sexbierum area from which water will be pumped up to heat the greenhouses. Cool water will then be pumped back into the soil via another well.

Working with AC Hartman to reduce CO2 emissions is Friesland Clean Energy Fund and the Dutch National Green Fund (NGF).

"The ground in the Province of Friesland is highly suitable for geothermal energy. The transition from natural gas to terrestrial heat will eventually lead to a sharp reduction in the province's use of fossil fuels, thus making an important contribution to meeting its sustainability targets," Friesland Clean Energy Fund CEO Michel Hendriks says.

Hein Deprez who heads a group of companies operating fruit plantations across several countries and is the major shareholder of the listed Belgian country Greenyard, is also looking forward to the development of AC Hartman.

"Making use of terrestrial heat and purchasing extra land from the Waddenglas project offers AC Hartman continuity and extra jobs. With a thirty per cent market share, AC Hartman is already the Netherlands' biggest organic vegetable grower, but this will make it one of the three biggest Dutch glasshouse horticulture companies," he says.



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