

23071 Vegetable shortages in UK could be ‘tip of iceberg’, says farming union

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Certain products are hard to come by in UK supermarkets due to poor weather reducing the harvest in Europe and North Africa, Brexit rules and lower supplies from UK and Dutch producers hit by the jump in energy bills to heat glasshouses.

The National Farmers’ Union’s deputy president, Tom Bradshaw, said the UK had now hit a tipping point and needed to take command of the food they produce amid volatility around the world caused by the war in Europe and the climate crisis.

“We’ve been warning about this moment for the past year,” Bradshaw told Times Radio on Saturday. “The tragic events in Ukraine have driven inflation, particularly energy inflation, to levels that we haven’t seen before.

“There’s a lack of confidence from the growers that they’re going to get the returns that justify planting their glasshouses, and at the moment we’ve got a lot of glasshouses that would be growing the tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, aubergine that are sitting there empty because they simply couldn’t take the risk to plant them with the crops, not thinking they’d get the returns from the marketplace.

Bradshaw also acknowledged that the current shortage was an indirect result of the UK’s decision to leave the EU.

He added: “It’s really interesting that before Brexit we didn’t use to source anything, or very little, from Morocco but we’ve been forced to go further afield and now these climatic shocks becoming more prevalent have had a real impact on the food available on our shelves today.”

On Wednesday, Tesco followed Aldi, Asda and Morrisons in introducing customer limits on certain fresh produce as shortages left supermarket shelves bare.

Tesco and Aldi are limiting customers to three units of tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers as a precautionary measure, while Asda is also limiting customers on lettuce, salad bags, broccoli, cauliflower and raspberries.

It comes as the shortage of tomatoes in UK supermarkets has widened to other fruit and vegetables due to the combination of bad weather and transport issues.

The environment secretary, Thérèse Coffey, caused a furore after she told MPs: “A lot of people should be eating turnips right now rather than thinking necessarily about aspects of lettuce, and tomatoes and similar.

“But I’m conscious that consumers want a year-round choice and that is what our supermarkets, food producers and growers around the world try to satisfy.”

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