

# OUTSIDE THE POLYTUNNEL

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- Promoting sustainable water management on commercial horticulture polytunnel sites.
- Building resilient supply chains based on best practice measures for water and environmentally friendly farming.
- Contributing to CaBA

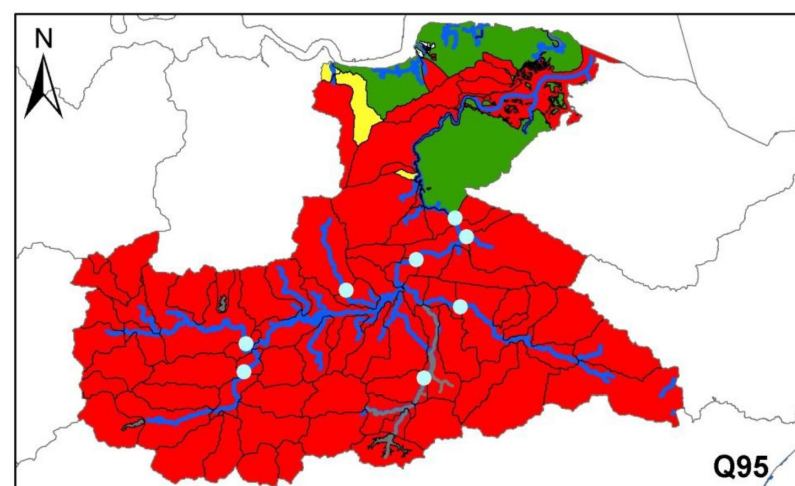
## The Good

In a time of economic uncertainty and doubts over global food production, polytunnel horticulture is a positive. Medway polytunnel trickle irrigated horticulture is a rapidly growing economic activity that has doubled in the last 5 years and now forms a significant part of the 36% of UK soft fruit produced in London & the South East.

## The Bad

Water availability and management are major issues in the Medway; one of the driest and most densely populated catchments in the UK. Fully abstracted and licenced Medway surface waters and groundwaters limit capacity to accommodate new licenses for polytunnel farmers. Many polytunnel farmers lack specialist advice, training and technical support on water management and are unaware of polytunnel impacts on the wider environment.

Excess runoff from trickle-fed fertigation can affect the water quality of local watercourses. Flashy runoff of rainfall from polytunnel polythene can cause localised flooding and soil erosion that impacts local watercourses and can damage local infrastructure.



Most of the Medway is "maxed out" for water abstraction licensing but polytunnel horticulture is a water-dependent and rapidly growing, economically important sector. There is a need to balance water demand and environmental needs.

## Holistic Water for Polytunnel based Horticulture

With water scarcity and environmental impacts in mind, SERT, Kent County Council and NIAB EMR teamed up to develop the "Outside the Polytunnel" (OTPT) project.

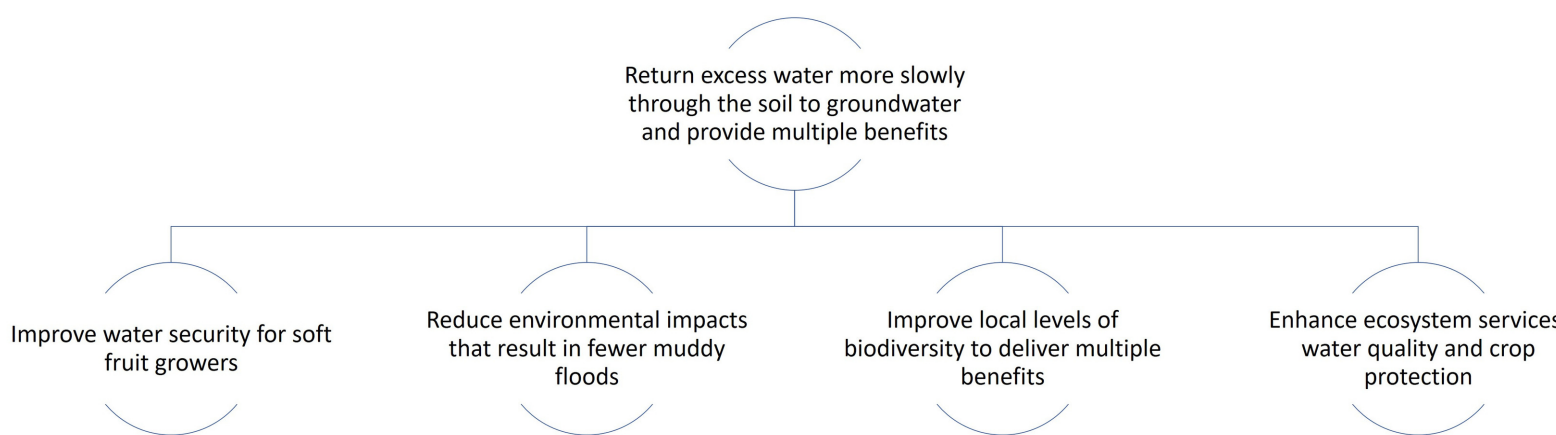
OTPT will develop measures for sustainable water management around polytunnel systems to produce multiple benefits for farmers and other stakeholders in the Medway catchment.

OTPT will research, test and demonstrate nature based water capture and retention features (floral interventions, wetland water treatment, silt traps and biodiverse ponds) that deliver multiple benefits to improve water security for Medway polytunnel farmers and benefit the environment. The project will work closely with Medway polytunnel supply chains to test and demonstrate OTPT systems and benefits. Guidance and advice will be made available to new and existing polytunnel farmers to encourage "buy in" to the OTPT concept.

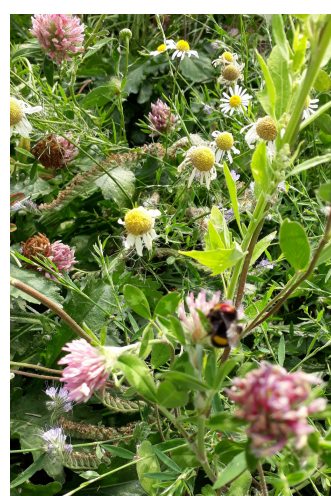
## Part of a bigger picture

OTPT is one of six projects the Rivers Trust is promoting across the UK to develop water stewardship by bringing together businesses from across sectors, with stakeholders from UK governments and NGOs, to tackle the collective challenge of water stresses through catchment management. Building on mature partnerships, the 6 projects focus on stressed and vulnerable catchments in key sourcing areas to develop actions that address issues in CaBA partnership plans. The projects build on best practice to demonstrate benefits of collective action. OTPT is currently working with M&S, Tesco, Sainsburys, Natural England and selected water companies but is actively inviting other retailers and stakeholders to participate.

Come to the OTPT launch event on the 1st May at NIAB EMR in East Malling, Kent to find out more!



OTPT will research, test and advise on options on interventions for water capture. The WET Centre at NIAB EMR (East Malling, Kent) is the OTPT "go to" demonstration site for suppliers.



OTPT is testing combinations of floral interventions that improve soil condition and infiltration to reduce runoff. Work has started at the WET Centre at NIAB EMR, and will roll out to commercial polytunnel ventures in the Medway that will serve as demo sites.



Floral interventions can help provide many other ecosystem services. Combinations of retention features such as biodiverse ponds and floral interventions at polytunnel sites will improve biodiversity and water quality and reduce runoff. The presence of more pollinators and insect predators will reduce the need for pesticide use, saving money for polytunnel farmers and benefitting the environment



The OTPT team will work closely with new and established polytunnel farmers and stakeholders in the Medway catchment to test OTPT elements in situ. The OTPT team will produce readily available and understandable Project Planning Guidance documents and advice for both new and established polytunnel farmers on the benefits of adopting the OTPT approach.

