



“A LOT OF ENERGY IN LABOUR, BECAUSE A GOOD WORKFORCE MEANS GOOD QUALITY”

The Grower Files > Ulrich Osterloh of Erdbeerhof Osterloh on energy and labour

His passion is clear: he wants to be the best strawberry producer in Germany, or better still, in all of Europe. Ulrich Osterloh is not merely an expert in his field; he genuinely lives and breathes strawberries. His business, Erdbeerhof Osterloh, grows strawberries on more than 250 ha of land. But those plants also have to be placed in the soil, the fruit has to be picked and packaged and the crop has to be taken care of. This means that in the high season the horticultural company employs more than 1,000 people. A unique feature is that it has its own ‘Wohnpark’, where the Polish and Romanian workers are housed and well looked after.

Extending the season

For grower/entrepreneur Ulrich Osterloh, energy and labour go hand in hand in many areas. Human hands continue to be indispensable on his German strawberry farm, but where mechanization and automation offer promising opportunities, the issue of energy also comes into play. “In both areas, sustainability is a key word,” says Osterloh. “We have to use fossil fuels and water efficiently and economically. But you also have to cherish good staff, because by binding them to you for a longer period you acquire knowledge and skills that result in a better performance and thus a better end product.”

The possibilities for saving energy would appear to be more limited on an outdoor farm than in a greenhouse horticulture company. Nonetheless, even in Visbek all the technical possibilities are being fully exploited or are being investigated; both because of their own convictions and on account of government measures. “Our energy consumption is monitored constantly. We are also open to switching our tractors from diesel to electric, for example. Installing solar panels is also an interesting option.”

Energy is not cheap in Germany. This has led Osterloh to look at alternatives such as biogas or residual heat from local industry. “Bringing forward the start of the harvest season is one of our goals over the next few years. Heat is essential in order to guarantee the quality of the strawberries, but that heat must come from inexpensive, green energy sources.”

Performance bonuses

The energy that his many workers supply on the fields and in the greenhouses depends, according to Osterloh, on the circumstances in which they work and live. “In the long term, automation will provide opportunities in the tunnel greenhouse, as we have opted for a rail system. A good workforce, however, remains an essential element in our endeavor to supply the very highest quality. Working with a modern [labour registration system](#) also offers opportunities for saving on costs.”

Osterloh has invested heavily in facilities for his predominantly Eastern European workforce. “Labour is

our largest cost item, but also our most important asset. Beautiful, delicious strawberries are the result of good crop care and careful planting, harvesting and packaging.” The permanent staff enjoy working at [Erdbeerhof Osterloh](#) and the seasonal workers are always happy to come back. Osterloh can guarantee them a good wage, supplemented by performance bonuses. One benefit which definitely distinguishes his company is the attention that is paid to living, eating and relaxing. Osterloh owns [Wohnpark Ahlhorn](#), which is located a stone’s throw away from his strawberry fields. All of his workers live in these former barracks, in accommodation units for two or four people. Meals are provided, but the camp also has its own supermarket. The various sports facilities are also important.

It is not just Osterloh’s workers who stay at the park, but also those of other farms in the region. “For this reason, in the season we install accommodation units for another thousand people. It costs money, it costs energy, but fortunately it also generates enough in return,” concludes Ulrich Osterloh.



> Erdbeerhof Osterloh

With crops covering more than 250 ha, [Erdbeerhof Osterloh](#) is amongst the largest strawberry growers in Europe. Quality and reliability are the main principles that drive Ulrich Osterloh’s business, and those are the reasons he is making the switch from outdoor crops to high-quality production in tunnels. Even though he has been in the strawberry business for almost 35 years, Osterloh has described this switch as an exciting and challenging project for his business, which is situated in Visbek, Germany (between Osnabrück and Bremen). “This switch will take us one step further into the future, and provides a foundation for my children, Alicia and Alexander, to build on”.

> Osterloh opts for Priva

[Erdbeerhof Osterloh](#) is in the middle of a transition process from outdoor crops to covered crops in greenhouses, but mainly in modern tunnels. To help realize this process, Ulrich Osterloh, the innovative, driven entrepreneur behind the business, has enlisted Jan Robben, the well-known Dutch strawberry grower, as well as Priva. To automate water dosage and fertilization, Priva has supplied Osterloh with a [Connex process computer](#).

> The Grower Files

In late 2015, Priva launched a video section under the intriguing title ‘The Grower Files’, in which notable national and international growers outline their vision of topical issues in the (greenhouse) horticulture industry. In these video messages ‘by growers for growers’, the entrepreneurs will also give an interesting insight into their business philosophy. Following in the footsteps of tomato grower [Frank van Kleef](#), gerbera grower [Marius Mans](#) and potted plant specialist [Frans Bunnik](#), the next installment features German strawberry giant Ulrich Osterloh.

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