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Great lettuce crisis is a taste of climate crop chaos to come

The UK's lettuce shortage is a stark warning of how even the world's wealthy will find their food supply disrupted by climate change

EARTH | COMMENT 9 February 2017

By **Olive Heffernan**



yes, we have no lettuce

Victoria Jones/PA Wire/PA Images

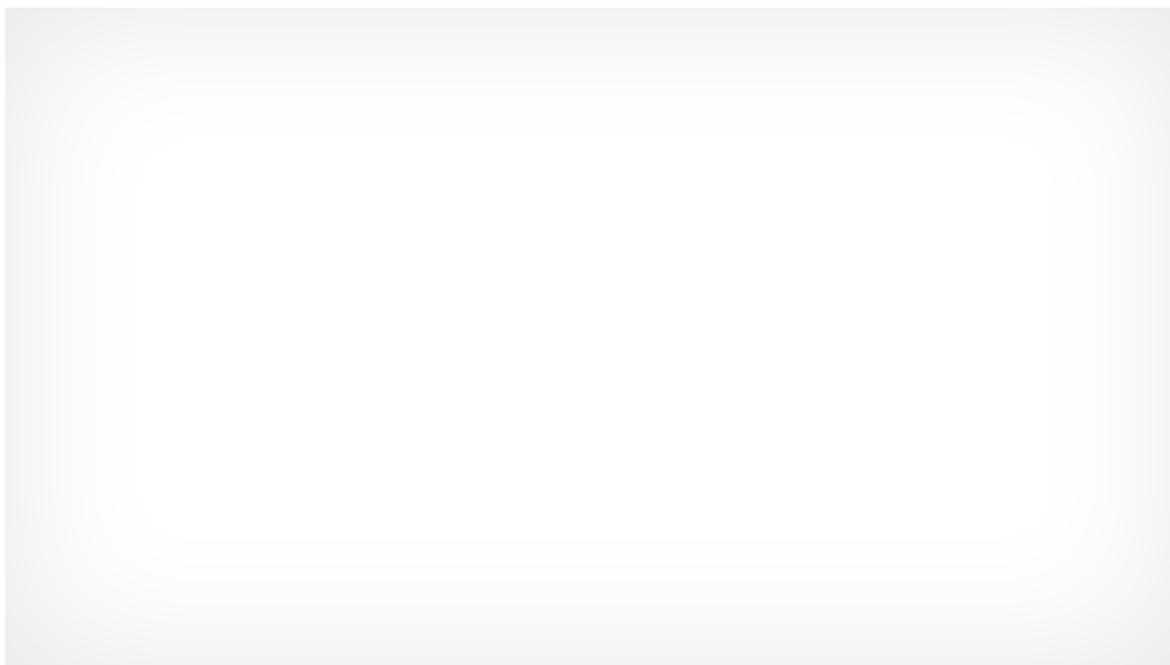
Severe snowfall across southern Spain has devastated crops, squeezing supplies of vegetables such as broccoli, spinach and courgettes (zucchini) reaching the UK. Some supermarkets are resorting to rationing – notably of iceberg lettuce, limited to three per customer in one big chain.

With shortages expected to last until spring, and big price hikes on the cards, the “lettuce crisis” has come as a shock to most consumers. Some have turned to panic buying, hoarding leafy greens where possible, although a few are [even reselling them to hard-hit restaurants and cafes](#). Others, however – such as celebrity gardener [Alan Titchmarsh](#) – have welcomed a rare opportunity for the British public to contemplate where, exactly, their food comes from.

As it turns out, half of all vegetables eaten in the UK are grown overseas. In winter, most come from southern Spain’s Murcia, Almeria and Valencia regions. But recent extreme weather, including flooding, snow and poor light, have left entire fields of salad crops lying frozen, to spoil, in the solid ground.

If there’s one thing this can teach us, it’s the extent to which [climate change can wreak havoc on food](#) grown for the world’s wealthy. Europe is [likely to see far more freak weather events](#) of this sort, if global temperatures increase by 2 °C.

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Yet most of us cling to the idea that in a warmer world, food shortages will be a problem for someone else, somewhere else. We assume they will particularly affect those who already struggle to feed themselves – the world’s most vulnerable, in Africa and parts of

Asia – whose [staple crops will probably struggle](#). Or the peasants of Mexico who, in recent years, took to the streets amid a [“tortilla crisis”](#) as the price of maize soared.

Make no mistake, the world’s poor will be the worst affected. But rarely do we see ourselves as part of this problem, one in which courgettes and iceberg lettuces become luxuries, or have to be swapped for plain old cabbages and turnips. Perhaps that’s why we are so desperately under-prepared for the shortages and price spikes that may ensue in a climate-altered future.

Recently, the UK government [came under fire from the Food Ethics Council](#), a UK charity, for failing to heed a warning of the urgent need to protect the UK food system against the threat of climate change.

The warning was [issued last year in a report by the Committee on Climate Change](#) – an independent advisory body based in London. It listed food security as one of the six top climate risks to the UK, and called for policy changes to deal with possible price rises. The government dismissed the concerns, arguing that “the resilience of food supply chains is regularly tested by severe weather and other events, and consistently performs well”.

In light of the lettuce crisis – which surely indicates otherwise – the government would be prudent to rethink its position.

The public, too, might want to face up to the idea that neither we, nor our lettuces, are immune to the climate threats gathering on the horizon.

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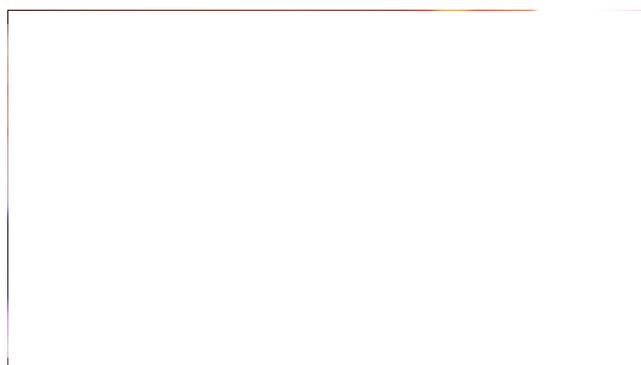
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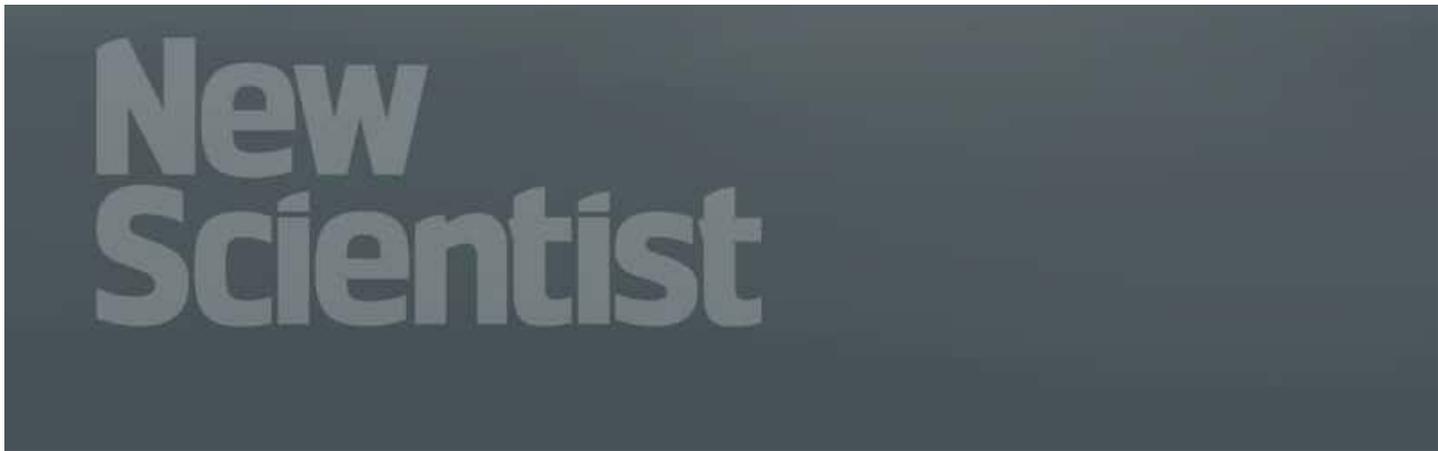
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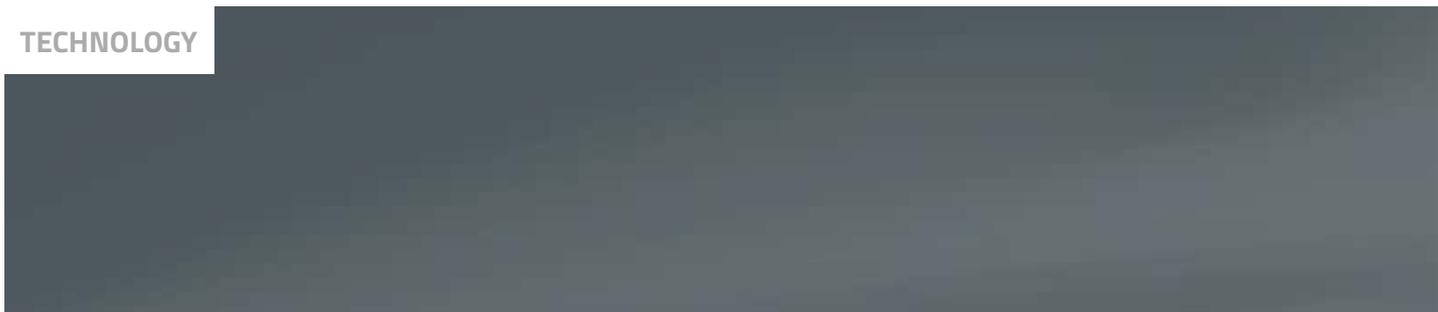
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