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It takes many years to develop new varieties of apples and pears and even longer before the newly planted trees start producing marketable volumes of fruit. For this reason, fruit growers are very interested in assessing whether there are new varieties which could help them respond to market demands. The Belgian research centre Proefcentrum Fruitteelt (pcfruit), has set up the Operational Group 'Plant for a Customer' to increase the success ratio of new varieties and reduce the risk for growers of planting an unsuccessful variety.

"It is a substantial financial loss for fruit growers when they find out after 7 or 8 years that their apples or pears aren't commercially attractive for the market or do not technically match the current standards. In this Operational Group we develop a process that will help fruit growers to evaluate which varieties to plant, according to customer preference. Promising ones are evaluated faster, hence can be planted earlier and are better supported. The process will help them to strengthen their competitiveness and reduce the risk of failure", says Dany Bylemans, CEO of pcfruit.

The idea for this project came about in 2014 when the fruit sector was in crisis. A broad consortium was set up to address the fruit growers' needs. It includes 20 fruit growers, and also different research centres, auction houses, tree nurseries, breeders and the Flemish government. Together they are designing a decision support tool to help decide whether or not to continue with a fruit variety. It considers commercial aspects, for example popular taste among customers and technical aspects such as the sensitivity to diseases. This comes along with questions related to fruit sensitivity to frost or bacteria.

Pcfruit is also involved in the European thematic network EUFRUIT (funded through Horizon 2020), which originated from European Fruit Research Institutes and EUFRIN. Dany: "In the working groups of these networks we can review the results that we have achieved with our Operational Group. We discuss for instance the assessment of the plant varieties in various European conditions. Researchers from all over Europe are involved in these networks and therefore you can find out how a specific variety of apple or pears grows in other countries, climates and soils. This is very valuable and really helps the research to progress faster. So conclusions in the Operational Group are not just taking into account the local results, but the results of all EUFRUIT and EUFRIN partners."

For the use of the research results it is essential that researchers are aware of the aspects that are important for fruit growers. Dany: "Sometimes not only the technical properties play a big role, but also picking efficiency, labour intensity and labour costs that are linked to an apple or pear variety. Therefore, it's important that farmers and researchers are already in contact at the beginning of the project, so that all the relevant aspects can be integrated in the research. Eventually this leads to an innovation that is better thought through and supported".

If you would like to disseminate this inspirational idea in your own network, please have a look at [the full press article](#) [1], which includes a shorter version and pictures you can use.

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[1]

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