A robot has been developed in the Netherlands that can locate and pick asparagus, replacing some 60 to 75 workers per forty hectares.

High-tech start-up Cerescon has created the automated harvester to address a labour shortage in the asparagus sector, with the vegetable notoriously difficult to pick.

The machine, which is capable of picking an entire row of asparagus in one go, would make a big difference to the industry, according to the Dutch Broadcasting Foundation (NOS).

The new machines will cost around €500,000 (roughly £424,300) and will begin operating in some asparagus fields as early as next year, according to Cerescon's technical director Ad Vermeer.

Sensors will allow the robots to detect where asparagus are in the field before using picking apparatus to remove the spears from the ground.

'It is a more accurate process, with fewer damaged asparagus and a bigger yield,' Vermeer told NOS, adding that the better quality asparagus can command a higher price.

The machine must be operated by two people but it has the potential to replace up to 75 people for every forty hectares of production, according to NOS.

The Netherlands, which is well known for its 'white gold' asparagus from the province of Limburg, is the second-largest exporter of vegetable in Europe behind Spain.