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# There's some power in this Ballad

## Technical Insiders View

Singing its way to joint top of the winter oilseed rape hymn sheet, Ballad reaches some deep notes for growers looking for a powerful performance. *CPM* takes a closer look.

*By Melanie Jenkins*

**Oilseed rape growers have a number of new varieties to explore on the AHDB Recommended List this year, but Ballad has performed its heart out, says its breeder, and offers an all-round package and a gross output that puts it joint top of the list.**

It's an undeniable fact that cabbage stem flea beetle and light leaf spot are making OSR growing something of a chore for many growers up and down the country, so it's as important as it's ever been to plant varieties that have the best chance of surviving. That's why early vigour, the ability to up seed rates and overall gross output are so important. That's where Ballad comes in, according to Carl Gibbard of KWS.

It was a top performer from the start, he notes. "I saw it two years before National List and RL trials and when it went into NL, it was very successful, coming top after two years. It's a very good high yielder, which is its strong point."

Will Compson of KWS agrees. "Ballad has

constantly impressed us over a number of years and has been added to the RL as one of the highest yielding and highest gross output varieties."

### Closest competitor

Though Ballad has not been in NIAB's private trials, Simon Kightley has recognised its performance through National List and RL trials. "Our list for each variety has shown that KWS Ballad is inseparable from its main competitor for gross output, while it's also top equal on the RL for the whole of the UK. An extra measure NIAB go to is through its long-term analysis of variety characteristics, in which Ballad was 0.2% better than its closest competitor."

However, Simon points out that in terms of yield, it may fall back into the pack of other varieties coming up through NL testing.

Frontier's Chris Piggott got quite excited about the variety when it was a candidate. "There's been a long line of good OSR conventionals from the KWS Momont breeding programme. We were quite involved early on and had it in our trials where it performed pretty well. The fact that it sits on the RL as having equal highest yield was a key deciding factor in us wanting to support it."

Ballad hasn't just performed in the East/West regions, but also in the North. "As proved in NL and our own trials, it performs well across different soil types and in different climatic conditions," says Carl. "We initially thought it would be more suited to the East/ West, but as it turns out, it was

recommended for the whole of the UK, so it's perfectly fine for the North and Scotland."

Will concurs: "It's proven to be remarkably consistent across all regions and is set to become a stand-out variety for the future."

In terms of its early vigour, it's slightly more vigorous than Barbados, but isn't as vigorous as Campus, according to Carl. "It would sit in the early to mid-range for drilling, so similar timing to Barbados."

Ballad, along with a number of KWS conventionals, is very fast in autumn, according to Chris. "This is very important and it comes as close as a conventional can to has hybrid vigour. Growers are pushing drilling earlier and earlier to combat flea



*Ballad is slightly more vigorous than Barbados, but isn't as vigorous as Campus, says Carl Gibbard.*

beetle, in an aim to get a decent sized plant early on. KWS Ballard is a fast-growing variety, so it should, in theory, be able to cope with flea beetle and other pests such as slugs and pigeons as well as any variety.”

The leaf shape of Ballard is particularly distinctive, says Carl. “It’s like a savoy cabbage and has a quilted appearance to the leaves in autumn before stem extension — it really does stand out”

Despite its vigour in the autumn, Christine Lilly of Frontier, suggests that it’s not the quickest variety off the block in the spring. “It’s not that forward, but this can be useful if you don’t want it to be too early in the spring in case of late frosts.”

A mid flowering variety, Ballard is also mid-range for maturity. “It’s in that healthy middle ground for maturity, so growers won’t be worrying about frosts. This is good for KWS, as we’ve had some later maturing varieties previously, so this is an added benefit.”

Simon agrees that it’s mid to late maturity. “This is good as these tend not to have the attitude to allow for compensatory growth if early flowers are hit by frosts. It makes it robust to have that long pod fill.”

It’s short to medium height, with very good stem stiffness at maturity, says Simon. “It’s

down as having good lodging and, although we’ve not seen bad lodging conditions for quite a while, having a 9 for stem stiffness is an assurance that under lodging conditions it should stand up.”

Chris points out, that as with all crops, growers are unwilling to compromise on standing ability. “This is a very positive attribute for the variety to have, particularly in lodging years.”

Christine also highlights that Ballard’s resistance to lodging and stem stiffness is an opportunity for people with more fertile soils. “It’s a relatively short variety, so won’t grow super tall even in fertile situations.”

It’ll probably only need a lower level of PGR-type products, unless in very fertile situations, she continues. “Its characteristics suggest that it wouldn’t need much PGR. Just concentrate on the fungicide side of things.”

However, Simon points out that its disease resistance isn’t spectacular. “It has moderate LLS resistance and is moderately susceptible to phoma stem canker, so growers can’t afford to cut back on applications.”

Its score of 6 for LLS, though not outstanding, is still robust and this will pay back in yield, explains Carl. “It has a 5 for



*Christine Lilly highlights that Ballard is an opportunity for people with more fertile soils.*

stem canker, but this is provisional as there’s not much data. So this needs a bit more information. But, it’s good mid-range for disease.”

He advises applying an autumn spray for LLS. “It’s worth being on top of a robust spray programme, as the more you put into it, the more you’ll get out of it.

It also has good tolerance to verticillium stem stripe. “It’s excellent against verticillium,” explains Carl. “We screen all of ▶

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## *Digital Agronomy*





Chris Piggott notes that the KWS Momont breeding programme has produced a lot of good varieties.

► our varieties for this through ADAS — so it's an independent authority. KWS Ballard came out as one of our top varieties against verticillium, but it's not quite the gold standard of Campus or Flamingo."

It's a conventional that continues to compete strongly in the presence of the steady flow of hybrids — we're seeing it right up there with them, explains Simon. "Which is important at a time when low seed rates are looking increasingly precarious with the build-up of flea beetle pressure. Last season was by far the worst nationally. I would suggest that the necessary relatively high seed rates to tackle this are unaffordable for hybrids but are more realistic with conventionals.

"Under extreme pressures like last year, nothing survives, but one strategy to get the crop going is drilling early and sowing as

much seed as you can afford to. With a variety like Ballard, that's stiff at maturity, it's possible as there's not the risk of the crop going flat — if it all survives that long," he says.

KWS believes that Ballard has the opportunity to take a significant part of the market over the forthcoming years, according to Will. "With the high levels of yields we've seen, plus everything else, it has attracted a lot of grower interest already. There's reasonable availability, but growers are advised to get in contact with a seed merchant as soon as possible."

Frontier has a seed crop of KWS Ballard growing this year, as well as an over-year crop for growers who want to plant it early. "This year's crop was drilled early and looks very well, so availability is quite good."

But Chris agrees that it's difficult to put a figure on its market share, pointing out that there are continuous changes occurring to the type of OSR growers are choosing to plant. "I do think it'll be significant on the conventional market though, as it's come from a history of good varieties. There's no reason why it couldn't become a top selling conventional OSR."

KWS's current portfolio consists of open pollinated, conventional varieties, explains Carl. "But we are actually hoping to introduce a few more hybrids into the programme too." KWS are using their own set of standards that identify varieties of OSR suited to growing in the UK. If a suitable variety that fulfils the criteria is identified, whether it's hybrid or open pollinated, we will go ahead and commercialise it," he says.

It's a good all rounder, that shows that open pollinated varieties are still very strong



Ballad's performance stood out to Simon Kightley in National List and Recommended List trials.

says Carl. "At the moment, growing OSR is quite a challenge, so the more options we can give farmers, the better the whole industry is. Campus has been our big hitter, but Ballard could well be up there too." ■

## KWS Ballard at a glance

UK gross output (% control)	103.7
East/ West region (% control)	103.8
North region (% control)	103.2
Oil content (%)	45.3
Resistance to lodging	8.0
Stem stiffness	8.5
Shortness of stem	6.6
Earliness of flowering	6.9
Earliness of maturity	4.5
Light leaf spot	6.1
Stem canker	[5]

Source: 2019 winter oilseed rape AHDB Recommended List; [ ] – limited data.

## Ballad performs for Cambs seed grower

Peter Jones grew a seed crop of Ballard for Frontier over the 2017/18 season and saw good results from it. Based at Peasgood and Sons, Langtoft, Peterborough, Peter farms 800ha, growing OSR, sugar beet, winter wheat, winter barley and winter beans. "We've got different farms, so these are on different rotations, but it's mainly a break crop of either beans, sugar beet or OSR, followed by wheat, then winter barley, spring barely and back into a break crop," he explains. "There's always a break crop one in three or one in four years, depending on the farm."

Last year Peter grew 44.5ha of Ballard for seed. It was drilled between 23-24 Aug 2017 behind winter barley. "The seedbed was beautiful; it went in with a sub soiler with a seeder at the back of the tines into a light gravelly loam."

The crop came up within five to seven days and established well, however Peter notes that it didn't seem to be very vigorous. "It was nothing outstanding, it mainly kicked off in the early spring," he explains. "It was on light land and we had a horrendous dry summer. The field it was on was gravelly which sucked the moisture out, so it never got very tall. It was more of a semi dwarf variety because it never got very high, but that could be down to the type of land. It might have been different on land with more moisture — I think it could have grown another foot."

In the autumn it had an insecticide and an application of Kerb (propryzamide) and Falcon (propaquizafop) to take out barley volunteers. "It didn't have a lot in the autumn — we gave it insurance fungicide sprays but it never got any

disease or had any issues." Peter didn't apply a PGR as he didn't feel it needed it.

"All of our farm is virgin OSR-growing land as we were huge sugar beet growers before. So other than normal fertiliser inputs of P and K in the autumn and N and S in the spring, it was pretty easy to look after."

It was harvested on 12 and 13 of July 2018 and averaged 3.59t/ha, with 44% oil. "It was an absolute piece of cake through the combine," says Peter. "Given the year and the summer we had, we were reasonably happy with it.

"It's a variety we'd probably grow again, but Frontier asked us to grow a different variety for seed, and we tend to stick to one variety when growing seed so we don't get any cross contamination."