

# talkingtaties

by Andrew Wilson



**Well, it looks like winter is back...**

**Here in North Yorkshire, rain has stopped play on all but the kindest land, with little land work being done for over three weeks now. Fortunately, we got our beans sown and muck spread while the going was good, and I'm glad we put some nitrogen (as urea) on winter crops when we did. They're ready for another feed now, along with potash and sulphur (PotashPlus) as soon as conditions allow.**

We have barley, oats and sugar beet to sow before we get to potatoes, but at the moment there's no rush. I'd far rather spring crops were up and away in good going than push them into cold wet soil.

The ideal potato planting time for us is anywhere from 15 April to 25 May. We're yet to see a good crop from a March planting, and late May crops often top the performance table on this farm. Some of this is down to chitting. An outdated practice in the eyes of some, but seldom are the benefits invisible. Chitted Royal can be out of the ground in under two weeks in late May, and not look back.

Conversely, in time gone by, unchitted early planted seed could take six weeks to see daylight — by which time its vigour had often evaporated.

Potato resilience comes from rooting, and with some shy rooting varieties, attention to detail is paramount. After a few trials, this year we have built our own applicator and applied fludioxonil as we fill our Blackburn chitting crates, primarily to reduce rhizoctonia risk and hence pressure from early dying syndrome.

Our trials have consistently shown a root health benefit from applying an in-furrow biostimulant, in the form of Consortium Plus. There are many things out of our control as growers, and with an ever-reducing armoury of tools to deal with whatever comes along, I feel we need to be proactive where we can.

A few years ago we started using Polysulphate fertiliser on our potatoes as a source of potash, magnesium, calcium, sulphur and boron. This was initially driven by cost effectiveness, but it has proved itself to be virtually essential. We don't need big amounts of magnesium, it contains less chloride than straight MOP, and the sulphur is cheap. The jewel in it, though, is the calcium (and to a lesser extent, boron) — an often overlooked and underrated nutrient but essential for internal tuber quality and, I have found, storability.

We started using Polysulphate at around the time we lost Vydate (oxamyl) and haven't had an issue with spraing so far. It may be that our radish-based cover

crops are having sufficient effect on reducing free living nematodes that tobacco rattle virus pressure is lower than it once was. That is certainly true for PCN. We use far less nematicides than we did 10 years ago, which has played its part in maintaining our soil biology.

Risk and volatility are nothing new in potato growing. Last June, I bought nitrogen at £630/t, and by September that looked a good buy. Now, it looks staggeringly expensive. By contrast, potash has come down a bit, and phosphate continues to reduce in price. As I write this in the closing week of March, I'm yet to order my DAP for placement at planting. Apparently, there is plenty in stock.

For a good many years now, I've been involved in trial work, in various crops, but mostly potatoes and beet. This year sees me engage in a regenerative potato project with Emerald Research and others, looking at ways to consistently grow commercial potato crops with less inputs. We're looking at a range of things, including nutrition efficiency, blight control, reduced cultivations and natural alternatives to current chemical solutions, which should be interesting. We've adjusted our strategy significantly over the past 10 years or so, but this will take things to an elevated level, and no doubt ascertain a few new boundaries.

All this year's beet crop is Conviso Smart beet, with half of it being Cruiser (clothianidin) treated. The likelihood of having Cruiser next year I feel are slim, so best that we investigate natural defences to virus carrying aphids while we can still protect at least

*Andrew Wilson is a fourth-generation tenant of the Castle Howard Estate in North Yorkshire.*

*He has a strategic approach to direct drilling on his varied soil types and grows a wide variety of crops. He's passionate about the potato industry and having been utilising cover crops to reduce cultivation and chemical use since 2011, dipped his toe in the water of regenerative potatoes in 2021.*

**@SpudSlingsby**

some of our crop. The best we can do, in my opinion is boost habitat for aphid predators like ladybirds, hoverflies and lacewings. Pyrethroid insecticides are notoriously ineffective and kill the majority of beneficial insects. In addition to our various Pollen and Nectar plots (AB1), we will this year experiment with a couple of intercrop flower strips, and a trial area with garlic extract between the beet rows. It may not work, but we won't know for sure until we try it.

The best defence as ever though, is a vigorous crop. Taking learnings from potatoes, we will this year try placing a small amount of nitrogen and phosphate down the back of the leading tine on our drilling rig and add to it some root stimulating biology to get the beet off to a prompt start.

First, we need the weather to behave itself, early April looks as conducive to in-field progress as most of March has been...

**HELIODOR 9  
VERSATILE AND  
COMPACT**



**LEMKEN**  
The Agronomist's Companion