



nature matters

by Martin Lines

The weather dice: when to drill or not to drill

Our autumns are becoming increasingly unpredictable, bringing with it the gamble of when to drill. Last year, we had a dry summer and autumn with little opportunity to germinate volunteers and weeds. This year has been the opposite, and we've achieved some very good flashes of weeds, which helped to reduce the seed bank and put less pressure on a pre-emergent herbicide.

With the ever-decreasing range of products we can use to remove weeds pre-emergence or in-crop, it's becoming increasingly important to eradicate as many as possible before planting. It's now time for the annual gamble of predicting when the weather will break, and our soils will become too wet or delaying enough to get a good kill on the black glass oats and brome. Here on our heavy soils, the black glass seems to germinate around the 15th of October and planning near this date is the optimal time for us. Input prices continue to rise, but grain prices aren't, so we're trying to minimise using products from a can and, instead, doing as much as possible with an integrated

pest management approach.

Over the past few years, we've seen our weed burden change from a heavy black grass problem reliant on chemistry to control it. Now, our focus is more on wild oats, brome and creeping thistle and stopping these weeds from becoming the next burden. Not long ago, the focus was on drilling early and with low seed rates, but this ended up creating more black grass and higher chemical bills. Not just in herbicides but in needing early spring fungicides, and the risk of barley yellow dwarf virus (BYDV) was higher. What we've found is trying to go as late as possible with higher seed rates has improved our financial returns, especially if we can use varieties that are better resistant to BYDV pressure on the earlier fields.

Our local agricultural show is the last Saturday in September, and this year, I was chatting with a number of local farmers about the changes we've seen in the previous 30 years. The show used to be a catch-up after harvest and before starting drilling. Then, the date moved, so some farmers wanted to have a field drilled before the show to say they had started. Next, it was all the first wheats done before the show, then it was who was finished by the show rolled around. Then everyone found the cost had gone up, and black grass had become a bigger problem impacting yields. Now, this year, most people hadn't started yet and were watching the weather forecast with plans to begin in a week or two. Like many things in farming, this merry-go-round always brings us back to working with nature instead of trying to fight it with more inputs.

One of the risks of drilling later on heavier soil is once it turns wet, it stays typically wet until the spring. Focusing on improving our soil health, structure, drainage, and organic matter can help improve the window within which we can operate. One of the current downsides is the weight of many drills and tractors. We can use the best tyre technology and tyre inflation systems, but we still have a large weight moving over our soil. There continues to be a debate on whether a disc or time is better in different conditions. Most of us only have one drill, so it's usually a compromise. Several neighbouring farmers seem to be working together: one would have a tined drill and another a disc drill, and they choose the light drill for the right conditions.

There may be Sustainable Farming Incentives (SFI) coming to reward the action of low disturbance or direct drilling. So, instead of needing a capital grant to buy one drill, you could buy a service from another farmer with a machine suited to those conditions. We're already seeing many within the supply chain, including brands, starting to offer premiums or incentives for actions that reduce carbon footprints and improve biodiversity. The added bonus

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is that these payments can be stacked or combined with other SFI or CS Agreements. Hopefully, more information on the SFI for 2024 and other incentives will be available soon so we can plan ahead.



Papley Grove Farm. Photo: Wild image Photography.