

A yellow light at the end of the break crop tunnel?



“Even if yield is relatively mediocre, growers are better off due to cashing in the premium.”

NIGEL PADBURY

Although the UK’s oilseed rape area is at an all-time low, this year’s crop appears to want to prove the naysayers wrong. *CPM* speaks to those who still believe in its potential to see if it’s worth keeping the faith.

By Janine Adamson and Rob Jones

With the weather gods offering much improved conditions compared with last spring, plus a suspiciously quiet population of cabbage stem flea beetle, Premium Crops’ Nigel Padbury says he’s quite optimistic regarding this year’s oilseed rape crop, touch wood.

However, he adds he’s under no illusion that this won’t necessarily mean growers will come flooding back to the yellow break crop in droves.

“Farmers are even more risk averse than usual at the moment, so despite OSR’s positive performance so far this season, I think it’ll take

more to instill some confidence. We have to be realistic,” says Nigel.

He suggests a range of factors seem to have worked in the crop’s favour – from improved conditions at planting to reduced CSFB pressure – although feathered friends have caused some growers mischief. “We’ve seen a lot more pigeon damage this time, but that’s likely because there’s much less OSR seed to eat in the first place.”

With the UK OSR area at an all-time low, he points out that for those with some skin still in the game, they could be rewarded accordingly. “As we head into autumn decision-



Glass half full

Premium Crops’ Nigel Padbury says he’s quite optimistic regarding this year’s oilseed rape crop.



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Bucking the trend

Robert (L) and Peter Nickols (R) say they're one of the only businesses in their area still growing oilseed rape.

► making, because specialist oil suppliers are anxious about supply we're seeing some appealing premiums coming to the market.

"For example, high oleic acid (HOLL) varieties could achieve bonuses totalling to more than £200/ha compared with a standard '00' crop, for Harvest 2026. Even more appealing, a high erucic acid (HEAR) contract could deliver a lofty £450/ha premium over '00'.

"This means even if yield at harvest lands up being relatively mediocre, growers are better off due to cashing in the premium," highlights Nigel. "Perhaps some food for thought."

Hutchinsons' head of integrated crop management, David Howard, agrees that OSR remains centred around risk management. "Even so, you'd hope this year might encourage some to reconsider growing it," he says.

From an on-farm perspective, he explains that other than where there's been pigeon damage, crops are looking great. "OSR crops which have seen bird damage are variable which will have an impact on flowering. Alongside potential weather events,

this could mean a prolonged flowering period which will be challenging for timing sclerotinia sprays.

"The decision to grow it next year will have to be based on historic success. Being such a variable crop nowadays, it'll be down to individual rotations and margin analysis as to whether that level of variability can be tolerated," adds David.

SUCCESS IN SLEAFORD

Two growers who took the risk this year are Robert and Peter Nickols of DE Nickols & Sons near Sleaford in Lincolnshire. Planting 40ha of OSR this season on their 430ha farm, they say they're one of the only businesses in the area still growing the crop, which was once the main non-cereal break crop for most of their neighbours.

Although the OSR area has halved on the farm since its peak – the other half replaced by beans grown for seed – the duo has continued to make OSR pay, attributing their success to timeliness at establishment and choosing a vigorous variety.

"We learned that waiting for balers to arrive doesn't work, so we now chop the straw," explains Robert.

"The tractor is on the drill before we start harvest," adds Peter. "As soon as the field is cleared, we have the seed ready and it's in. In fact, we've had a few years where the drill was in the same field as the combine."

The farm's dedicated OSR drill is a low disturbance subsoiler mounted on a Grange toolbar with an attached Weaving mounted drill and StocksAg Turbo Jet. Seed is placed in 50cm rows at a typical rate of 50 seeds/m², and a starter fertiliser is applied at the same time.

This drill setup evolved from previous methods where land was subsoiled and the crop was planted using a Väderstad drill that went crossways to the subsoiling. "The only place where there were strong plants was where the subsoiler leg had been so we thought, why waste money sowing in between?" says Robert.

Buckwheat is planted using a spreader as the first pass in the field post-drilling, helping to mask the OSR crop from cabbage stem flea

beetle while securing £55/ha for the CIPM3 SFI action.

The cousins have also switched from growing conventional varieties, often as farm-saved seed, to exclusively planting hybrids for their vigour. Robert says: "When CSFB was first an issue, we took the view that home-saved seed wouldn't cost as much if we lost the crop, but we did it at the detriment of vigour.

"We've now moved back to hybrids and have used the cash-back establishment schemes on occasions."

This year they're growing RGT Kanzzas, which they selected based on its vigour. "At the time it was the one that stood out; we've noticed its vigour this year," comments Peter.

BUMPER POTENTIAL

Over at Bishop Burton in the East Riding of Yorkshire is Shelby Farming. With the local climate meaning growers can produce impressive yields if conditions allow, Guy Shelby's OSR crop for Harvest 2022 averaged 6.7t/ha, delivering an incredible return considering the commodity prices at the time, he says.

"On heavy coastal soils and with cool bright days, those kinds of yields aren't uncommon in this area and it's the same with wheat," points out Agrii agronomist, Billy Hosdell.

However, last season told a different story. "It's a lottery – in 2023 I drilled around 100ha and had 12ha left at harvest. Yet this year, nothing has eaten my OSR apart from pigeons," explains Guy.

Shelby Farming is an Agrii iFarm site where Billy used a Bayer Magic Trap to record the levels of adult CSFB last summer and found very few. Whereas in 2023 using a traditional method, he caught 30 beetles per trap



Establishment methods

East Riding grower Guy Shelby says he's gone full circle with oilseed rape establishment methods and landed back at using a subsoiler.



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► each day in the morning, and when he checked again as he returned home in the evening, found another 30.

Guy says he's gone full circle with his establishment method and landed back at using a subsoiler. He also plants a companion crop, qualifying for the CIPM3 SFI action.

"Our best yields all came from when we were using subsoilers. Then we started using a Mzuri; I think it was one of the best OSR drills on the market. We switched systems and moved to a Horsch Sprinter which worked well, but the yields started dipping off because it doesn't have a deep leg. Now we've

gone back to a subsoiler," he explains.

Following a conversation at Cereals Event, Guy replicated Tim Lammyman's approach of sowing both conventional and hybrid varieties by planting Inv1035 and Aardvark together. This is based on the theory that CSFB should target the slower-growing conventional variety, leaving the hybrid to establish successfully. There's also the potential benefit that the shorter conventional complements the taller

"We've had a few years where the drill was in the same field as the combine."

hybrid, providing a greater depth of podding through the canopy, adds Guy.

According to Billy, many farmers in East Riding would love to stop growing OSR. "But what do they do instead? We have vining peas in the area but you can only grow them one in five. Then, we've struggled

to control bruchid beetle in beans so can only grow for animal feed. A few obscure crops are being planted, but they tend to be one-hit wonders.

"As such, a non-OSR rotation is quite a challenge. It becomes a lot of second wheat, spring barley and oats."

Offering an alternative perspective is Ben Wilson, farm manager at Glympton Farms on the edge of the Cotswolds in Oxfordshire. He says the farm's approach to growing OSR is similar to the Dave Brailsford Method, whereby it's an aggregation of marginal gains.

And it appears to be a success – moving from OSR being on the verge of leaving the rotation, to achieving consistent results. This is because in the 10 years before the 2013 ban on neonicotinoids in OSR, Glympton Farms' yields averaged 3.27t/ha – a respectable return on their drought-prone soils, says Ben. However since the ban, this dropped to 2.57t/ha, leading to a review of OSR's place in the rotation.



Top performer

RGT Kanzzas was second highest yielding in Agrii's 2024 variety trials.

Building biomass, building yield

Evidence suggests there's a close relationship between biomass and CSFB damage

Despite the range of variety traits available to oilseed rape growers, the most desired attribute remains vigour, say agronomists.

Driven by this trait, plus disease resistance, is RGT Kanzzas. David Leaper, Agrii seed technical manager, says Kanzzas followed a strong 2023 performance in the company's trials – finishing the second highest yielding variety in 2024, an average of four sites located across the country.

"One thing we've evaluated is late autumn biomass, analysing how large the plants are going into winter," he explains.

"What's driven our variety choice during the past few years is varieties that grow relatively quickly, producing a big plant with a nice thick stem. Not only are they better at coping with cabbage stem flea beetle, but they're also less vulnerable to weather conditions and pigeons," says David.

Early spring vigour is a factor Agrii correlates against assessed levels of CSFB. David says the firm believes there's a close relationship between spring vigour and lower CSFB symptoms. "Generally speaking, the higher the biomass, the lower the symptoms."

CULTURAL MEASURES

This led to Agrii agronomist, Peter Carr, identifying some cultural control measures for Ben to implement.

"The first year we didn't quite get things as we wanted them to. But last year, we successfully lined everything up and the crop yielded 3.43t/ha, which is back up to where we expected yields to be before the [neonicotinoid] ban," says Peter.

The first step was to extend OSR in the rotation to one in five. "We've moved into fifths – there are two-fifths wheat, one-fifth barley, one-fifth OSR and one-fifth beans," explains Ben.

Peter adds: "We're cutting stubble long – 20-30cm – and anything before OSR is chopped. This means the burden of straw on the soil surface is about 15mm, so you don't have a thick 50mm mat of straw which is associated with high slug pressure.

"The long stubble also acts as a



Cultural approaches

After a dip in oilseed rape yields, Peter Carr (L) identified cultural control measures for Ben Bishop (R) to implement on the farm in the Cotswolds.

physical and visual barrier to CSFB. You can't tell there's OSR being grown on the farm until October because the plants are so well hidden in the stubble," he explains. "Equally, the most impressive thing with the chopped straw layer is how it's helped with weed seed suppression – it's led to a 40% reduction in herbicide use."

An application of poultry manure helps to balance the C:N ratio of the chopped straw and provides some available nitrogen in the autumn to build biomass ahead of winter.

The farm opts for a conventional variety with strong spring growth to get the growing point away in mid-February, in this case, Amarone. "It's a steady grower through the autumn and then really moves as soon as the soil warms up in the spring," points out Ben.

ROOT ACTION

The drill is slightly offset against the previous wheat crop to plant between the rows of stubble, keeping it intact and allowing the OSR roots to utilise the old root system of the wheat crop, he adds.

Buckwheat at 8kg/ha plus 4kg/ha of purple vetch are used as companion crops. The buckwheat provides a canopy above the OSR and its roots mine phosphate which is released to the OSR crop later when the frost kills the buckwheat. By leaving the vetch in the crop for as long into the spring as possible, it can fix 30-50kgN/ha, highlights Peter.

These measures appear to have paid off again this year, with Glympton Farms' OSR looking full of promise as it finishes flowering, comments Peter. Both he and Ben hope it will at least match last year's output. ●



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