



WITH GUY SMITH

Smith's SOAPBOX

Watch this space

“My father was one of those post-war farmers where the success

of the crop was determined by what you did before you sowed the seed, as opposed to what you did to the crop afterwards. Arable farming in the 1950s was largely a matter of drilling the field, shutting the gate and not bothering to return until harvest.

In contrast, his impressionable son would get excited by every new wonder product that appeared in glossy ads in the farming press. I remember at a formative age explaining to dad that I wanted to spray the wheat with a new formulation of seaweed extract as it'd lead to more vigorous crops by stimulating natural growth hormones. Dad's response was to mutter something along the lines of not noticing much in the way of vigorous growing on the beach foreshore where the tide washed the seaweed in.

Dad's home-spun farming philosophy of concentrating on the basics before worrying about the latest gizmos came back to me this harvest when sitting in the combine cab. You couldn't help but notice the yield meter plummet wherever there was any soil compaction. A drought year can be a very unforgiving one if you haven't done the basic preparation of your seedbed; no amount of fertiliser or fungicide or even biostimulants can remedy neglecting the soil in the first place.

So we've been grinding a lot of metal this autumn in

an attempt to bust up a lot of bone dry ground set with all the friability of concrete. The invoices for sub-soiler points at £30 a time seem to arrive rather too regularly. Hopefully I'm building the foundations of some bumper crops next year that'll have roots so deep they'll always sit in the moisture of the sub-soil no matter how severe the drought.

We're growing a HEAR hybrid variety of oilseed rape this year. I've been persuaded that a hybrid will give me extra vigour even if I drill at worryingly low seed rates. I write all of this assuming that by the time you read *CPM*, the cotyledons will have become leafy little plants rather than succumbing to flea beetle, slug or whatever other menace is out there lurking in the undergrowth.

We still tend to drill OSR around the August bank holiday, but I note in the press some farmers claiming the way to beat cabbage stem flea beetle is to drill in July, whereas others claim September drilling is best to beat the dastardly leaf munching critters.

Personally, I think the best timing is just before a few weeks of wet weather to help the plants to quickly grow away. I'll confess that this is totally dependent on luck, because given the inaccuracy of long-term weather forecasts, there's no telling if or when the rain will arrive. This autumn, it looks like we've been lucky given the inch of rain that arrived the fortnight after we finished drilling. To slightly ease my autumnal frets about crop establishment, my kindly seed merchant has said it'll only charge for half the seed until it sees the crop establish in good order. At the moment, we're watching that space.

I note that the old farming practice of growing a mix of

two crops is coming back into fashion. Not to be outdone this year we managed to produce a mix of winter beans and black mustard.

The truth is that while we planted the winter beans, the black mustard was self-sown. My crop management proved equally wild when I declined to use bentazone herbicide in the spring. Partly because of the expense, but also because we struggled to find a window to spray given the sunny April weather which not only risked scorch, but also rapidly brought the beans into flower.

Given the year, the bean yield wasn't too disastrous at 3.6t/ha. I've no idea what the wild mustard yielded owing to the fact we had the combine sieves

open. Hopefully all this weed seeding will be easy enough to control in the following wheat, but I fear I might have put the mockers on the next OSR crop, unless these Clearfield varieties live up to their billing. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Guy Smith grows 500ha of combinable crops on the north east Essex coast, namely St. Osyth Marsh – officially the driest spot in the British Isles. Despite spurious claims from others that their farms are actually drier, he points out that his farm is in the Guinness Book of Records, whereas others aren't. End of.
@essexpeasant

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