

# Shaping up for spring – fresh options and market drivers for 2026



As growers start looking at their spring 2026 rotations, shifting market expectations, tightening sustainability requirements and renewed demand for alternative break crops are reshaping the decisions ahead. *CPM* explores options that could provide resilience and value in the season ahead.

By Charlotte Cunningham

**A**s the New Year looms and growers start to turn their attention to spring cropping plans, a tightening malting barley market shaped increasingly by carbon scrutiny – alongside renewed interest in alternative break crops – means the decision-making landscape for 2026 is anything but static.

With end-users sharpening their expectations and new varieties gaining traction, spring remains an important opportunity to build resilience into

rotations. Across the supply chain, a clear shift is underway, too – spring cereals are no longer valued solely for their grain quality or consistency, but also for how they are produced.

This arguably places renewed emphasis on establishment systems, nutrient use efficiency and varietal choice, particularly where crops feed into malting supply chains now under pressure to demonstrate measurable reductions in carbon footprint.

At the same time, rising demand for

omega-3 rich options like linseed is opening the door for growers seeking lower-risk, lower-input alternatives that still deliver strong margins.

Dave Griggs of Crisp Malt says the landscape for malting barley is shifting rapidly. For years, breeders and end-users have focused largely on functional traits such as nitrogen content, alcohol potential and flavour. But now, breweries and distillers want to know not just what growers produce, but how they produce it.

Investor and consumer pressure is also pushing the drinks sector to minimise environmental impact, and this in turn is driving unprecedented scrutiny of malting barley production.

Dave points out that Crisp Malt has spent three years baselining greenhouse gas emissions with its grower groups and is now supporting transitions toward regenerative approaches



## Sky's the limit for Skyway

Added to the AHDB Recommended List in 2023 and awarded full MBC brewing approval the following year, early grower interest centred on Skyway's strong yield potential and reliability on heavier land.

- ▶ aligned with the SAI Platform's Regenerating Together Framework.

This goes beyond introducing cover crops or direct drilling, he adds. A full framework has been developed to monitor the adoption of regenerative practices, supported by third-party auditing to give credibility and resilience.

Dave explains that this auditing element is increasingly important for the entire supply chain. Rather than relying on theoretical modelling or generic book figures, Crisp Malt has committed to using independently verified, farm-level data. This provides reassurance to both growers and buyers that the sustainability metrics being reported accurately reflect what is happening on farm.

He says the intention isn't to validate or disprove any particular regenerative claims, but simply to ensure transparency. For breweries and distillers under pressure to demonstrate progress on carbon reduction, the ability to trace practice change back to audited, UK-grown barley is becoming a valuable asset.

Trials of low-carbon fertilisers have also shown promising improvements in nitrogen use efficiency. Dave stresses that growers aren't expected to deliver rigid annual improvements, as seasonal pressures make this unrealistic.

"It's quite likely that the weather

this season will have a negative impact on the data for 2025, but it's important for growers that they're able to demonstrate they've done the best they can given the situation."

Early results from this low-carbon fertiliser works suggest these products can help reduce emissions associated with nitrogen manufacture and application without sacrificing yield. Dave says this is particularly relevant for growers who are concerned about the potential risks of altering establishment systems or reducing input levels too sharply.

The fertiliser trials indicate that there are practical, low-disruption ways to reduce the crop's carbon footprint, and as more seasons' worth of data is gathered, Crisp Malt expects such inputs to play an increasingly integral role in regenerative barley production.

However, Agrii's Charlie Catto says that many regenerative-style practices are already established on farms that prioritise efficiency and soil health.

"Growers are used to responding to market demands and these are no different. They also understand the need to protect soils and integrated crop management is standard practice for many, as is the use of farmyard manure and digestate, while the use of cover crops is increasing rapidly."

He emphasises that yield remains central, and importantly, higher yields also lower carbon emissions per tonne of grain, meaning productivity and sustainability increasingly work

***"The demand is already strong. Now we simply require more UK growers to make the most of this opportunity."***

hand-in-hand. "For the grower, yield has always been king, and few would be willing to jeopardise it."

But there's also an appreciation that more focussed agronomy can continue to unlock incremental gains to promote greater efficiency, adds Charlie.

"There's a requirement to take a more considered approach to agronomic risks that focusses on the details. From the benefits of manganese seed treatments to micro-nutrition to variety selection, progress must be constant."

Amid this shifting context, variety choice is taking on even greater significance, with Skyway from Agrii, and Shona from the Elsoms stable, offering two distinct but increasingly attractive options for 2026.

After several seasons of strong brewing performance and increasing familiarity across the supply chain,

Skyway has now secured broad market acceptance, overcoming earlier segregation constraints at maltings.

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Much of Skyway's momentum has been driven by shifting attitudes within the malting industry itself. Historically, reluctance to widen varietal choice was strongly linked to limited silo capacity and a preference for established market leaders such as Laureate and RGT Planet.

But as Skyway consistently delivered



## New option for the East with Shona

Shona, from Elsoms, is emerging as a variety with significant potential for growers in the East and beyond, positioned as a dual-purpose barley capable of meeting both brewing and distilling requirements.



## Linseed potential

For growers looking for an alternative option this spring, linseed potential appears to be booming...

**A**longside the barley options, spring linseed is also gaining momentum as a valuable rotational choice. Premium Crops has launched a £600/t contract for 2026 in response to booming demand from food, feed and industrial markets, driven particularly by the livestock feed sector's requirement to enrich diets with omega-3 as part of the Bleu Blanc Coeur initiative.

"Demand for UK-grown linseed remains extremely high, and this new contract gives farmers a secure market and a strong fixed price at a time when margins are under pressure," says Premium Crops' Nigel Padbury. "With linseed the richest natural source of ALA omega-3



among oilseeds, UK growers are well positioned to meet this demand."

Among available varieties, Nulin50 currently tops Premium Crops' 2026 assessment tables, combining yield, oil content and high ALA levels suited to premium feed markets, making it a strong option for the coming season.

Equally, the agronomy package for 2026 has also strengthened, with a new EAMU for Emerger (aclonifen) joining Avadex (tri-allate), Katamaran (quinmerac+ metazachlor)

and Calisto (mesotrione) to widen early weed control options.

Nigel points out that low fertiliser demand, relatively low pest pressure and a strong fit within cereal rotations underpin linseed's growing appeal, while long-standing relationships with European processors such as Valorex continue to secure markets.

"The demand is already strong," he concludes. "Now we simply require more UK growers to make the most of this opportunity."

reliable brewing quality over multiple harvests, maltsters gained increasing confidence in its performance. This gradual shift is helping to remove the logistical barriers that previously limited uptake, paving the way for the scale of contract now being offered.

What's more, Bunge UK has now partnered with Agrii to secure an exclusive contract with Boortmalt at Bury St Edmunds, marking a significant step forward for the variety.

Grain trading manager, Tom Eaton, says the contract is highly competitive and reflects the wide market acceptance that supports Skyway's proposition as a brewing variety. "This contract offers growers a clear route to premium markets with no logistical or approval hurdles."

Premiums currently range from £15-£25/t over ex-farm feed barley depending on location, with nitrogen specifications capped at 1.85%.

Alongside Skyway, Shona is emerging as a variety with significant potential for growers in the East and beyond. New to the AHDB Recommended List for 2026 in the East region, Shona is positioned as a dual-purpose barley capable of meeting both brewing and distilling requirements.

During three years of trials, it's delivered treated yields of 106% of controls, demonstrating consistency under a range of conditions.

Although its disease resistance profile is sound, Shona's key attraction lies in its malting quality.

"It has one of the highest hot water extracts and predicted spirit yields of any spring malting barley on the RL, enhancing its appeal to maltsters," says George Hebdon of Elsoms Ackermann. "With two years of micro-malt testing completed and a third underway, the variety is on a promising path toward full approval."

In the field, early experience has been encouraging. Harry Smith of Nethermill Farm near Cruden Bay grew Shona for the first time in 2025, drilling 6ha on 11 April at 190kg/ha into loamy soil. The crop progressed quickly through early development and reached ear emergence sooner than Laureate, despite sharing the same ripening score.

It also maintained green leaf well through a very dry summer and yielded 5.5t/ha despite drought, outperforming several commercial standards across the business. "Harvested on 25 August, Shona averaged 5.5t/ha, understandably below our five-year

average due to the near drought conditions, but still comfortably outyielding many of our other commercial spring barleys," says Harry.

Another factor generating interest in Shona is its early maturity and harvest timing. Harry notes that its ability to maintain green leaf area allowed it to continue filling grain during the driest periods, something he didn't observe to the same extent in the farm's longer-established varieties.

He also found Shona straightforward to manage, with no unexpected agronomic quirks, and felt its growth habit fitted neatly into the farm's spring workload. For growers under pressure to spread risk and avoid bottlenecks at harvest, this earlier maturity could prove an important advantage.

Following this performance, he plans to increase his area of Shona to 30-40ha in 2026, with scope to scale further depending on market approval.

Toby Reich of Elsoms Seeds says Shona's arrival is timely for a malting industry purchasing around 1.9M tonnes of UK-grown barley each year. "Shona not only offers an improved agronomic performance, but also a step-change in the malting-spec quality required for the brewing/distilling sector." ●