

# Smith's SOAPBOX



WITH GUY SMITH

## The spectre of the early reaper

“ One October morning, roughly a generation ago, I recollect arriving at my parents' breakfast table with the proud news my wife was expecting, the due date being mid-July. Predictably, my mother was full of tearful congratulatory hugs, but my father's response was more prosaic: 'You're cutting that close to harvest time'.

I could but respond with a wry smile at the thought of my intimate-life being ruled by my responsibilities in the combine cab.

The sanctity of harvest time and the forbidding of its interruption is ingrained among arable farmers. Whether this is becoming more pronounced is a good debate – Dad was certainly obsessed by it more than me.

The thought of not harvesting when crops were fit was non-negotiable in his eyes, and it should be noted none of his four children were born in July, August or September. He also departed the world in mid-September – it was as if he knew he shouldn't go until all had been safely gathered in.

Today, with larger machinery and better driers, possibly some of the old harvest mania has weakened its grip. Earlier harvests starting in mid-July also help, as the nightmare scenario of a wet September doesn't haunt as much as it did.

Equally, many arable businesses are trying to bring home larger tonnages than 30-40 years ago, which can make the intensity and risk all the more palpable.

Dad never bothered with chaser bins, his 'chasing' was from his Range Rover as he checked all staff were at action stations once moisture in the field dipped below 17%.

All this summertime fervour returned when my son announced that he and his girlfriend were engaged with a view to getting married in 2026. I was delighted to hear they were happy to go 'old school' with a ceremony in the parish church, which prompted the idea of a tent in our garden for the reception.

My initial thoughts were dominated by the spectre of me spending most of the winter, chainsaw in hand, putting right decades of neglect in what I'd laughably described as my 're-wilding project'. But then we had to come up with a date.

The happy couple were keen on August – at this point, dad's harvest ghost appeared and I suggested early July was preferable for extra daylight, sunny weather and garden blooms. Fortunately my disingenuousness didn't show, as I calculated the last thing I'd want to be doing when my 55ha oilseed rape crop was ready was erecting marquees and assembling make-shift bars among the hollyhocks.

So 4 July was duly agreed upon. The church was booked as was the tentage, and by very early spring, everything looked on track. The organist and the Portaloos were secured; swathes of bramble and ivy had been cleared from flower beds and, more importantly, the OSR looked nicely winter dormant.

Then, to unnerve me through March, it didn't just respond to lengthening spring days, it exploded into a mass of yellow flowers. By May it was clearly entering the finishing straight, with the heatwave making it feel we were weeks

ahead in growth stage.

As I write, the race is neck-and-neck between a ripened crop and my son's wedding. Yet again the ghosts of past rainy harvests came to haunt by chiding me for being so reckless to allow a family wedding in early July. What was I thinking?

Actually I know exactly what I was thinking – I'd never harvested OSR before 10 July so it didn't seem at all likely for 2026. In hindsight, it turns out the happy couple's preference for an August wedding might have actually been better, agronomically speaking.

So dear reader, brace yourself next month for a picture of me in my wedding suit sitting in the cab of the CX. Looking on the bright

side, hopefully it'll be a good omen and both crop and marital union will prove equally fruitful. I certainly won't be so mean to suggest that secretly I'm hoping for wet weather so I'll at least be happy in the knowledge I wouldn't be combining anyway. ●

### 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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