Making the case for OSR

After a turbulent decade marked by cabbage stem flea beetle pressure, shrinking hectarage and changing management practices, oilseed rape remains one of the most debated crops in the rotation. But with crop performance improving and growers adapting their approach, is confidence beginning to return? *CPM* explores in its latest survey.

By Charlotte Cunningham

Few crops have experienced such a dramatic shift in fortunes as oilseed rape during the past decade...

Once considered a cornerstone of the arable rotation, the crop has faced relentless pressure from cabbage stem flea beetle, rising establishment risk, and increasing scrutiny over whether it still warrants a place on farm.

For some growers, the challenges became too great and cropping area was reduced or removed altogether. Others have persevered, adapting management and learning to grow OSR under a very different set of circumstances.

Now, following two comparatively positive seasons and with many crops looking promising this spring, there are signs confidence may be returning...

This is according to a recent survey carried out by *CPM* and NPZ which revealed that more than 45% of growers are maintaining their current area, while almost a quarter said they had increased their area in recent seasons.

According to NPZ UK managing director Tom Yewbrey, that reflects a gradual shift in confidence. "The reasons for the decline are well known and well documented," he says. "If you get a good crop, it pays well, it's good in the rotation and it's good for the farm, but the risk of growing it put people off.

"However, Harvest 2025 produced some really good crops. We had a lot of sunshine in April, pest pressure was relatively low and yields were strong. Coupled with reasonable commodity prices, that's led to an increase in area for Harvest 2026."

Tom believes the crop still delivers many of the same benefits it always has, but growers are increasingly learning how to manage it under modern conditions. "Growing it the way we used to with neonicotinoid seed treatments doesn't work as well," he points out. "The lessons are being learned and management has evolved."

Despite the challenges of recent years, OSR remains the primary break crop for more than half of respondents, ahead of the likes of beans, peas, sugar beet and environmental scheme options – a finding that comes despite many growers experimenting with alternatives during the crop's most difficult years.

For Bedfordshire grower Andrew Robinson, who farms 1200ha at Toddington, OSR continues to earn its place in the rotation. "In the past we probably grew OSR in a closer rotation, but we've extended that to one in five now," he

Adapting the strategy for OSR
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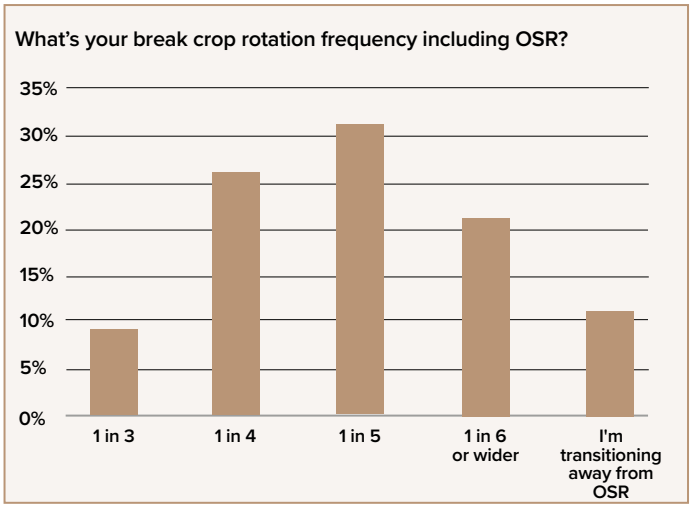

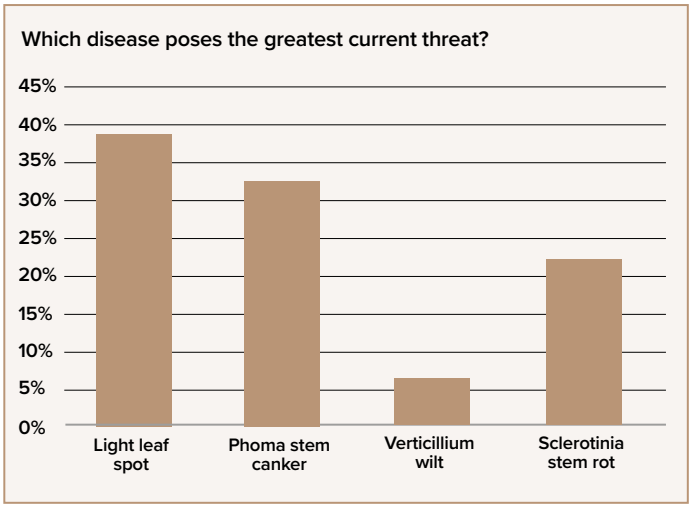

A firm place in the rotation

For Bedfordshire grower Andrew Robinson, who farms 1200ha at Toddington, OSR continues to earn its place in the rotation – despite trying alternative break crops.

explains. "That's reduced the area slightly, but it's helped to improve crop health and hopefully reduce flea beetle pressure.

"What's important for us is that our biggest first wheat yields consistently come after OSR, rather than peas or beans."

The survey also suggests wider rotations have become firmly established across the industry. Almost a third of respondents now grow OSR one year in five, while a further 27% operate a one-in-four rotation and 23% a one-in-six rotation.

According to ProCam's Rob Adamson, that shift is likely contributing to improved crop performance. "The reason flea beetle pressure has probably dropped a little is because there's less OSR around to feed it," he says. "If you widen rotations and move the crop around more, you're naturally reducing pressure.

"There was a time when many rotations had drifted to seeing OSR appearing one-in-three years, which was not sustainable agronomically, and we don't want to return to that. Wider rotations are helping to manage risk and make the crop more sustainable."

Rob also believes the crop continues to offer something many alternatives struggle to match. "It's still a really important break crop and, if you can get it right, it's likely to be the most profitable," he says. "That's why growers continue to come back to it."

Perhaps nowhere has grower thinking shifted more noticeably than around OSR establishment. When asked what most influences drilling decisions, respondents overwhelmingly pointed towards soil moisture, weather conditions and flea beetle pressure – while very few indicated they were still drilling according to a fixed calendar date.

DRILLING LATER

That flexibility is also reflected in attitudes towards later sowing, with 67% of growers saying they would consider drilling from the beginning of September.

According to Rob, the result reflects a much broader shift in how growers are approaching establishment. "Five years ago, most discussions around OSR centred on controlling flea beetle," he says. "Now the conversation is much more about how you establish a resilient crop in the first place."

Rather than a single solution, Rob believes growers increasingly have two distinct approaches available. "You either drill later and try to avoid the peak of the migration and rely on autumn vigour to establish the crop, or you drill very early, build a large biomass crop that can cope with adult feeding damage, and rely on robust plant architecture to tolerate larvae pressure in spring," he explains.

Both approaches come with their own advantages and challenges. Drilling early can allow crops to establish rapidly ahead of adult feeding. The adults will still arrive, but the plant should be of a size to cope. They will however still lay eggs at the base of the plants, and it's therefore essential to develop the stem thickness needed to withstand larval feeding later in the season, he says.

"If you have larvae damage on an early-drilled crop with a robust stem, the crop stands a chance of surviving attack," notes Rob. "One of the key resilience mechanisms is stem thickness. A bigger collar simply copes better."

However, he cautions that early drilling requires active management. "If you're going to drill at the end of July or very early August, you can't just leave the crop alone. Growth regulation becomes incredibly important and, in many cases, growers are applying PGRs too late.

"The best autumn regulation is achieved with intervention at four leaves. Beyond six leaves you've already missed much of the opportunity to influence crop structure."

At the other end of the spectrum, later drilling presents a different challenge. "With September drilling, you're trying to achieve the opposite outcome," he explains. "You've hopefully avoided the worst of the migration, but now you're trying to build enough biomass before winter.

"That's where variety choice, rooting, nutrition and aspects like biostimulants all come into play."

While later drilling may seem counterintuitive to some growers, Rob points out that many record-breaking crops have actually been established during September. "Agronomically, later drilling can give you the highest yield potential. The challenge is having the confidence to leave seed in the shed, and wait for the right conditions."

Tom echoes this and agrees that ▶

Establishing a resilient crop

ProCam's Rob Adamson says five years ago, most discussions around OSR centred on controlling flea beetle, but now the conversation is much more about how to establish a resilient crop in the first place.

▶ growers are increasingly recognising that establishment should be driven by conditions rather than dates – with many now seeing the potential in heading towards September.

NPZ trials have explored the interaction between drilling date, crop development and disease pressure, with some interesting results. "What we've been looking at is accumulated day degrees and how quickly crops develop before winter. If crops become too advanced too early, they can actually begin to limit their yield potential because they start moving before sufficient nutrition is available to support that growth."

Andrew has also adjusted his drilling strategy in response to changing pressures. "Moisture is absolutely the key driver," he says. "We've drilled in July before, but you massively increase flea beetle larval pressure. These days we're generally targeting the end of August and potentially into early September if conditions allow."

Modern hybrid varieties have made that approach increasingly achievable, he adds. "With conventional varieties on our cold clay soils, later drilling could be difficult. But modern hybrids have much stronger autumn vigour, which gives you more confidence."

In terms of variety choice, ask growers what they want from a crop and historically, yield would almost certainly have topped the list. However, the survey suggests priorities are changing.

When asked which characteristics matter most when selecting a variety, establishment vigour narrowly edged ahead of yield potential, with 66% of respondents selecting it compared with 65% for yield – a very significant finding, agree the experts. "The single most important factor for me is autumn vigour," says Andrew. "It doesn't matter what seed rate you use if the crop doesn't grow."

Rob picks up the conversation and adds that he believes growers are becoming increasingly pragmatic, hence the slight shift in priorities. "Yield potential is exactly that – potential," he says. "You can lose far more yield through poor establishment than you ever gain from chasing an extra percentage point on the Recommended List."

The result reflects a broader shift towards selecting varieties based on their overall agronomic package rather than a single headline characteristic. Disease resistance, spring vigour and establishment characteristics are increasingly being considered alongside yield when making variety decisions, he adds.

While establishment may dominate discussions around OSR, disease management remains firmly on the agenda for many growers. Light leaf spot was identified as the greatest disease threat by 39% of respondents, followed by phoma stem canker (32%), sclerotinia (22%) and verticillium wilt (6.5%).

For Tom, the findings highlight both changing disease pressures and the progress being made through breeding. "We have pretty reliable light leaf spot resistance now, with many newer varieties carrying ratings of 8," he says. "What was interesting was seeing how widespread concern around light leaf spot has become. Historically it was viewed as more of a northern disease, but we're seeing it much further south as well."

NPZ has also invested heavily in strengthening phoma resistance, he adds. "The industry has relied heavily on *RLM7* resistance for a long time and there are signs that efficacy is declining. We've introduced *RLMS* and now *RLM12*, and stacking those genes together should help to improve durability and reliability going forward."

Rob concurs and believes modern genetics are helping to reduce overall risk. "15 years ago we were making multiple fungicide applications targeting LLS and phoma. Today, the disease package delivered by breeders is much stronger and the crop is generally more manageable than it used to be," he says.

Going forward, whether OSR hectarage continues to increase remains to be seen, and few expect a return to the 700,000ha crop of years gone by. But what the survey makes clear is that growers who continue to back the crop are doing so with a very different mindset.

Wider rotations, stronger genetics and a greater focus on establishment have all helped to reduce risk and improve confidence. And for Andrew, success ultimately comes down to giving the crop the attention it deserves. "If you're going to grow OSR, grow it properly," he concludes. "Use good seed, drill it in the right conditions and manage it well from day one. If you do that, it's still a very valuable crop." ●