

Seeding success for consistent results



“Now we’re growing healthy, vigorous plants that can better withstand the pressure.”

STEVEN OFFORD

With each season as unpredictable as the next, consistency of performance is an increasingly critical factor when it comes to what an oilseed rape variety offers a grower. *CPM* reveals why focus is shifting away from headline-grabbing numbers towards trusted reliability.

By Janine Adamson

As recent seasons have demonstrated, it can be boom or bust for oilseed rape. In one year yields can be record-breaking, but in the next, margins can be negligible. Equally, with limited break crop options, much can rely on what OSR delivers not only in terms of rotational benefits, but for farm business profitability too.

While it may be tempting to scan the Recommended List for the top yielding OSR, according to Openfield’s Duncan Durno, success depends on much more than potential tonnes per hectare. In fact, the cooperative promotes a strict set of criteria based around stacked genetic traits in addition to gross output.

He believes optimised variety choice is critical to help achieve consistent success. “Despite a couple of improved years, the industry is fully aware of the risks, many of which

are beyond the grower’s control. Varieties of today must mitigate those factors as much as possible right through the growing season.

“Yes gross output remains an essential factor, but without a package of genetics and traits supporting it, it will be difficult to achieve that potential if challenges indeed arise,” he states.

Otherwise, this is where growers may find themselves disappointed in what originally presented as an excellent option. “Attention to detail is paramount when growing OSR, with variety choice and type forming a base to be built upon. Once the crop is planted, this isn’t something that can be easily compensated for later,” he stresses.

RELIABILITY COUNTS

For Limagrain UK’s head of technical, Liam Wilkinson, he recognises that

for the grower, it’s what’s in the trailer that counts. “However, rather than a one-off record-breaking harvest, the aim should be a consistent crop year-on-year, irrespective of conditions and external factors.”

Agreeing with Duncan, he says it all starts with selecting the optimum variety. ▶



Consistency is key

Rather than a one-off record-breaking harvest, the aim should be a consistent crop year-on-year, irrespective of conditions and external factors, states Limagrain’s Liam Wilkinson.

► “While establishment risks remain, these are mitigated somewhat when a grower opts to plant a trait-loaded hybrid. And now, thanks to Limagrain’s development work, there are no significant downsides from the introduction of these traits into hybrids, whether that’s yield lag or a reduction in oil content.”

The journey to this new wave of OSR reliability began some time ago, adds Limagrain’s OSR product manager, Florentina Petrescu. She says this has only been possible following the company’s continued confidence and investment in the crop. “We believe strongly in UK OSR due to all of the benefits it offers for both growers and the wider industry. As long as you can maintain yield potential, it can pay off,” she comments.

“As such, we’ve maintained our investment in its breeding programme despite the OSR area declining until very recently. Ever since we launched our first hybrid varieties in 2006 we’ve continually introduced genetic innovations.”

She lists that this includes benefits such as phoma stem canker resistance, pod shatter resistance and tolerance to verticillium – traits that all Limagrain hybrid OSR varieties must have. Resistance to TuVY and clubroot have also been introduced, as well as improved stem health and Sclero-Flex for tolerance to sclerotinia.

“However, our latest innovative tool is CSFB Resilience – a series of agronomic characteristics to help reduce the



A considered approach

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Coming together

Limagrain’s Florentina Petrescu believes the industry is applying appropriate IPM methods for OSR and starting to see the results.

impact of cabbage stem flea beetle.

This is based on understanding how to overcome two pest pinch points – adult feeding in the autumn and larval feeding in the spring,” explains Florentina.

INCREMENTAL GAINS

When all of the above traits and factors are combined, it’s possible to achieve incremental gains for yield and performance, therefore reduce risk, she suggests. And rather than focus on yield alone, this translates to robust varieties with staying power.

“Our varieties are consistent performers, which is testament to their resilience and stability. This is achieved by focusing on traits rather than varieties in isolation, providing growers added reassurance and confidence.

“In turn, Limagrain’s breeding programme has brought forward varieties that help OSR to achieve its potential – it can be the star of the rotation if all comes good,” urges Florentina.

Liam agrees that the breeder’s focus on traits has added security to what can be a volatile crop, which has been partly achieved by trialling varieties in environmental extremes. “Our European breeding stations bring so much valuable data, in fact, CSFB Resilience began from work conducted in France. We also conduct screening across the Baltics – potential varieties

are tested in absolute extremes.”

Then it’s a case of cherry-picking options for the UK before trialling new material on home-turf, he adds. “For example, we use a high-pressure trial site in Scotland to screen for light leaf spot resistance and compare this with commercially available varieties. For verticillium we have a site in Suffolk.”

The result of such robust testing is varieties like Aurelia that was launched seven years ago, raises Liam. “It’s still being grown in the UK all these years later and offers remarkable consistency. That demonstrates that our strategy is working.”

Looking to the future, he stresses that while fortunes have improved recently, bolstered further by varietal excellence, now isn’t the time to become complacent. “We have to work backwards and understand why the current OSR crop looks so good, for example, understanding the impact of drilling conditions and subsequent management techniques.

“We can’t return to mass OSR planting and growing the crop using old methods – the way the industry farms has changed for the better and part of that has been down to continual learning,” he stresses.

Furthermore, Liam adds that OSR is now a professional crop based on high-value seed. “Growers are starting to get the best from it, but the principles of establishment haven’t

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changed: good seed-to-soil contact, fertiliser requirements, planting dates and canopy management.

“Unfortunately, the problem of establishment hasn’t truly gone away, so the good things we’ve learnt during the past decade or so will continue to bring benefits to help mitigate unpredictability and potential risk.”

And the knowledge exchange continues, highlights Florentina. “There’s a sense of renewed confidence recently, we’re continually learning more about CSFB and how to manage the pest. I feel that because we know so much more, we’re finally getting to a point where the industry is applying appropriate IPM methods and seeing results.”

GROWER PERSPECTIVE

Demonstrating such learning in action is Steven Offord of JD & RJ Baker Farms in Elmswell near Bury St Edmunds. He says having struggled with the performance of conventional OSR due to pest pressure, he had to rethink his production strategy.

“Both establishment and yield were very hit and miss, mainly due to CSFB. Then, because we’d lost interest somewhat, we found ourselves targeted by rape winter stem weevil which proved even more damaging,” he explains.

“We had to find a way to deter beetle damage, which led us to selecting a variety which would enable us to drill at a lower seed rate and encourage larger stems.”

Having already been involved with Limagrain’s wheat breeding programme, Steven was encouraged to try Aurelia, which he says demonstrated excellent vigour as well as various traits that he deems essential for his system.

“It offered all we were looking for. For one, pod shatter makes such a difference – it gives confidence that the crop won’t be lost on the floor. Then, because we have sugar beet in our rotation, aphid pressure and TuVY can be an issue.

“We also want to be able to drill early. This is because we tend to sow OSR behind winter barley, planting as soon as possible when there’s seedbed moisture,” he details.

Having been suitably impressed with Aurelia, Steven was presented with Armada for Harvest 2026. “We drilled the crop at the end of July during a window of moisture, planted at a low seed rate of just 35 plants/m². Its establishment was exceptional,



Constructive critique

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it was quickly up and away.

“It came through the winter looking very healthy and grew away again once it woke up in the spring. The crop hasn’t looked back so I’m hopeful for harvest.”

Steven highlights that to add confidence regarding rape winter stem weevil control, the crop received an insecticide application, although he’s hoping Armada’s genetic traits will do a lot of the heavy lifting. “I’m quite enthused by it all actually.

“I’ve had some false promises from other plant breeders but it seems that Limagrain truly knows what growers actually require from an OSR variety, and they work to tick those boxes. I have very few negatives to share, in fact, I anticipate a significant uplift in our OSR area next year,” he comments.

Steven agrees that times have changed and the crop can no longer take a hands-off approach. “We’ve had years where OSR was worth nothing and you’d just leave it and hope for the

best. But now it requires the best seed, stewardship and management. You have to go for it from day one; it has to be grown properly with investment.

“When we’ve had poor harvests in the past, I think this could have been down to bad variety choice leading to a crop that was vulnerable to pest damage. Now we’re growing healthy, vigorous plants that can better withstand the pressure. We’re far more professional in how we grow OSR.”

According to Steven, it’s now about finessing the numbers even further. “A break crop must make money and generally speaking, OSR stacks up well. To improve profitability even further, I may look to reduce seed rates even further, if conditions allow.

“Also, knowing that Armada has such good autumn vigour, it can handle delayed drilling if the seedbed moisture isn’t there. Waiting for the correct conditions is crucial to really make the most of the crop,” he concludes. ●

Inside traits

With plant genetics playing an increasingly important role in how growers manage crops in today’s agricultural systems, CPM has teamed up with Limagrain to reveal the company’s latest developments within plant breeding.

Through privileged access to staff and their expertise, the ‘Inside traits’ series investigates the genetics behind Limagrain’s latest varietal releases, to help understand what makes a successful crop suitable for today and beyond.

As seasons and conditions continue to test, Limagrain strives to rise to the challenge by offering solutions which help growers to build resilience into their farming businesses.

