

"There's an old adage that when OSR seed is twice the value of feed wheat, it's a good sell."

NICK HOBSON

The comeback crop

Oilseed rape, at least on paper, is appearing to be a good break crop option again. *CPM* looks at the economics and latest advice for successful establishment.

By Mike Abram

Following a decade in the doldrums, oilseed rape appears to be making a comeback, and while economics are a key driver, confidence in successfully growing the crop seems to be rising.

This is backed by Andersons' latest crop area forecast, which estimates the current planted area has risen 22% year-on-year to an estimated 306,000ha. That's lower than AHDB's planting and variety survey, which estimated 358,000ha, although some believe this may be overzealous. Perhaps equally as important is AHDB's late May crop condition report, which suggested

78% of crops were good or excellent.

Despite the recent uplift, the area remains far below the pre-neonicotinoid ban era when up to 755,000ha was planted, and still less than the 391,000ha grown in 2023 when prices spiked following the start of the war in Ukraine.

IMPORT RELIANCE

Subsequently, the reduced area has left the UK in an emergency situation with edible oil food security – dropping to just 15% – and imports costing the nation approximately £1bn annually in net trade, according to United Oilseeds managing director, James Warner.



Food security crisis

The reduced OSR area has left the UK in an emergency situation with edible oil food security – dropping to just 15%, highlights United Oilseeds' James Warner. ►

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Confidence to go for it

Reasons behind two growers' decisions to go for gold with OSR

With a lack of break crops and a demand for alternative herbicide active ingredients, Essex grower Ed Ford has made the decision to go back to OSR after a decade away from the crop.

For one, brome is becoming a challenge on parts of the farm, especially where there's been a continuous wheat rotation. "The plan for next year is to take out 110ha of 11-year continuous wheat and replace it with OSR.

We can't control brome in these areas, and because we've been OSR-free for such a long time, it should be like growing it on virgin ground," he explains.

A key benefit is bringing OSR back into the rotation provides additional potential options for grassweed control in Kerb (propyzamide) and Centurion Max (clethodim), adds Ed.

Then looking at his wider approach to growing OSR, he says he's unlikely to drill early. Straw will be removed from the previous wheat crop and sewage sludge will then be applied, incorporated with a pass from a Väderstad Carrier.

"And then we'll wait for moisture, there's no point drilling without it. So we'll wait for rain and the right opportunity. With our 12m Horsch Avatar, we should be able to drill 110ha in a day."

At this stage, other than selecting a hybrid, he's unsure of exactly what variety. "I'm a little out of touch," he admits. "But we'll probably try one of the establishment schemes where there's financial compensation if the crop fails."

Returning to OSR should



Herbicide options

A key benefit from bringing OSR back into the rotation is additional potential herbicide options for grassweed control, suggests grower Ed Ford.

Photo: BASF

► "We have a strong domestic demand and a crushing industry ready to process, but now we're importing more than half of the OSR we consume," he highlights.

With around 2m tonnes of demand for UK OSR, current production of around 1m tonnes means the country is structurally short. However, increasing the area, certainly back to neonicotinoid era heights, risks inviting back pests like cabbage stem

flea beetle to levels that make establishing crops even more challenging.

That conundrum has led industry campaign group 'OSR Reboot' to set a target of around 500,000ha as the optimum for sustainable UK OSR production, notes Liam Wilkinson, head of technical for Limagrain. "It's unusual for an industry to be setting limits, but the reality is we don't want too big an area as that's when problems begin."

reduce nitrogen fertiliser spend a little too, he hopes. “We put 280kgN/ha on our continuous wheat to reach milling quality, whereas we’ll probably apply a maximum of 200kgN/ha on the OSR. Our soils are likely to be fairly high in nitrogen because we’re not growing high yielding wheats, plus there’ll be some residual from the muck.”

Over in Nottingham, Joe Fisher is looking to expand the farm’s OSR area, having returned to the crop last autumn. He explains that some poor OSR yields in the early 2020s – partly due to high cabbage stem flea beetle larval loading reducing spring vigour – meant he moved away for a couple of years. However, he dipped his toe back into OSR with 20ha for this current season.

“The crop is looking reasonable heading into harvest, so we’re looking to increase that four- or five-fold for Harvest 2027,” he says.

Recognising his previous struggles with spring larval infestations, he drilled this year’s crop in September. “I applied some digestate ahead of it, then planted some Campus with a Claydon drill.”

With optimum establishment conditions autumn growth was strong, and with minimal pressure from slugs and pigeons, the crop looks promising,



Worthwhile gamble

Nottinghamshire grower Joe Fisher dipped his toe back into OSR last autumn and says the crop is looking promising.

he says. “I doubt it’ll be record-breaking but if we can yield 3-3.5t/ha, the margin will be reasonable, not outstanding, but better than other options.”

Next season’s expanded area will replace some land currently in environmental schemes where the future is uncertain, as well as beans, and some maize on heavier ground.

He’s planning to stick with farm-saved Campus seed, and supplement it by buying in any additional requirements. “We’ll drill with a companion crop of berseem clover, fenugreek and buckwheat, which acts as a failsafe if the OSR doesn’t come to a lot – you already have your cover crop in ahead of redrilling a spring crop,” concludes Joe.

SOUND PROSPECTS

Economically, the crop’s prospects look positive, even if Australia looks to be heading for a record crop. This is because OSR has been trading around 2.7 times feed wheat value during the past year, says United Oilseeds’ Nick Hobson, with price supported by global energy instability in the Middle East and biofuel mandate demands.

“There’s an old adage that

when OSR seed is twice the value of feed wheat, it’s a good sell,” he adds.

Contracts of around £415/t delivered, which oil bonuses could potentially push into the region of £450/t for 2027 harvest, were available in June, and the possibility the crop could be the best performing option on farm, beating first wheats, he says.

But that’s dependent on establishing the crop, with CSFB remaining the primary concern for



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- many growers, although weather, slugs, pigeons and some other pests all potentially impact success.

As such, choose carefully where OSR

is grown, advises Indigro agronomist, Damian McAuley. "We know CSFB come in from neighbouring fields, so if you can, maintain some sort of geographical distance from previous OSR crops."

Swedish research suggests distances of at least 0.8km, although that might not be practical on many farms,

especially where OSR is grown every season. "If you have management of those fields, then early cultivation disrupts flea beetle pupae before they emerge," says Damian.

Research into the life cycle of CSFB

"If you're looking to apply nitrogen, concentrate it in the smallest area possible around the seed."

has revealed that the majority pupate within the top 30mm of the soil, so cultivation doesn't have to be deep.

NIAB / AHDB trials have shown at least 50% reduction in flea beetle numbers, although previous research found in excess of 3m adults emerge from soil per hectare



Finding the sweet spot

According to Limagrain's Liam Wilkinson, it's unusual for an industry to be setting planting limits, but the reality is problems began when the OSR area was too large.

Any cultivation should be weighed carefully against moisture loss, notes Damian. "Direct drilling is better for establishing a crop because it helps to retain moisture."

Furthermore, direct drilling into established cover crops, for example coming out of environmental stewardship schemes, can also help to trap moisture, adds Liam, while zero-till can help to visually mask emerging OSR plants from CSFB, that seem to be attracted by a green-on-brown background.

There's also debate over the role of companion crops. Liam believes they can be detrimental as they compete for moisture, while others suggest growing companions like berseem clover, buckwheat and fenugreek help to mask the crop.

COMPANION BENEFITS

Cambridgeshire farmer Tom Martin is in favour, partly because of fenugreek's curry scent reputedly disguising the attractive cabbage smell for CSFB, while Damian points to berseem clover's ability to potentially fix 10kg/ha of nitrogen, as well as support soil biology, including mycorrhizal fungi that don't thrive in brassica crops. "Some will be getting a payment of £55/ha if you're in an SFI option too," adds Damian.

Early nutrition is helpful for achieving good establishment, he stresses. Positive impacts from organic sources such as digestate or poultry manure, can help to mask the smell of OSR

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from CSFB, says Damian.

Equally, Liam advocates placing fertiliser. "If you're looking to apply nitrogen, concentrate it in the smallest area possible around the seed so you get the biggest bang for your buck from your NVZ regulation limits."

As for drilling date, there are two schools of thought – early to get crops established before the main

migration of adult CSFB, or delaying until after that's happened, although the consensus is soil moisture is more

important than drilling date.

Whichever is chosen, management decisions should be tweaked. For example, while seed rates can be reduced when drilling earlier with better plant establishment, the result can be thicker canopies too, explains Liam.

"That might mean thinking about growth regulator products in the autumn. If you have a big canopy and leave it until

spring, it's too late. You have to be proactive."

Earlier drilled crops will have different disease susceptibility to the ratings on the AHDB Recommended List too, he highlights. "Light leaf spot becomes the most important disease in early drilled crops because you'll likely have thicker canopies."

Like yellow rust in wheat,

the disease cycles quickly, but it's the later stages when it infects stems and pods that cause

yield loss. Therefore, early control, even if resistance to fungicides is increasing, should be the aim.

Equally, weed control can be more challenging in early drilled crops, as fewer plants will be controlled with glyphosate applications. "That could lead towards Clearfield varieties if you know you have problem weeds that aren't controlled using a stale seedbed," concludes Liam. ●

"If you can, maintain some sort of geographical distance from previous OSR crops."

Could silicon be the answer?

Thinking outside the box for CSFB control

As well as utilising no-till and companion cropping, Cambridgeshire grower, Tom Martin, has been using a silicon-based biostimulant as part of his strategy to beat cabbage stem flea beetle.

Applying Soil Fertility Services' Vita-Protect at two true leaves at 3 l/ha, with a second dose at 5 l/ha when there's a 'decent sized target', the product's silicon content helps to improve cell strength and

plant rigidity, explains Tom.

"That's really helpful in decreasing the palatability of the plant," he suggests. "But there's also some microbial bacterial elements within Vita-Protect that interfere with the digestive system of CSFB."

"I'm not sure how far that goes as it doesn't kill the beetle, but we haven't lost an OSR crop in the 8-10 years we've been using it, alongside other cultural measures," points out Tom.



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