



WITH GUY SMITH

Smith's SOAPBOX

Bad timing, good timing, two timing

“It's a good old farming chestnut to ask arable farmers which they fear the most – a very wet year or a very dry year? The answer is usually subjectively coloured by the flavour of the weather at the time.

Looking at UK wheat harvest figures, it'd seem too much wet is the more serious. According to Defra, the flooded 2020 gave us a record-breaking meagre wheat harvest of 9.66M tonnes, whereas the drought last year gave 11.96M.

Having said that, both were well down on the long term average of around 14M.

So not surprisingly, neither ends of the weather spectrum are good for farming returns. We like 'Goldilocks' weather, while both mummy bear and daddy bear would do better having their porridge in an environmental scheme that always returns something come rain or shine.

The killer question for this year's harvest is does it come on the back of a flood or a drought? For us, the autumn and winter gave us twice as much rain as we'd normally expect and yet the spring and summer looks like it will be less than 30% of the average.

Having finished the OSR and yet to start the

winter wheat or beans or spring wheat, I suspect it'll be the usual curate's egg with the OSR surpassing expectations, the wheat meeting moderate expectations, and the beans and spring wheat bringing up the rear with cries of 'why did we bother?'.

Combines started to roll on this farm on 8 July. If we had barley it would have been a June start, but for us it was the OSR that kicked things off. Looking at diaries of previous harvests, we're a full fortnight in front of ourselves.

In north east Essex, the norm was that. Aside from the odd maverick who had a taste for cutting green barley, there wasn't much combining to talk about when the locals met up in the members' tent at the Tendring show. The show is always held on the second Saturday in July – it's been much the same since the first show in 1899.

No doubt our forefathers chose this timing for the very reason that farmers wouldn't be busy with harvest as it was yet to start. But now that harvests seem to start earlier and earlier, maybe the show committee might reconsider timings, as the prospect is half of the stewards are too busy on-farm to help man the show.

But then again, if the current trend in continues, it may be the second Saturday in July becomes an ideal timing, but because most farmers have wrapped up their harvests and put the combine away.

Harvest is always a time to reflect on the year as you sit in the isolation of the combine cab. At the moment, it seems we should expand the OSR crop and not bother

with anything else but winter wheat. But then I'm reminded of that old farming adage 'when it comes to cropping plans, forget last year but remember the past decade'. Or to be put it another way, in the words of my late father – 'don't be jumping around like a grasshopper'.

Adapting my father's wise words, you could say when it comes to the planned OSR area for next year I shouldn't be 'jumping around like a cabbage stem flea beetle'. From what I saw in the combine tank and grain store floors, it'd seem CSFB numbers are low. Hopefully they've been incinerated by the heatwaves we have seen so far.

No doubt the jokers are actually keeping a low profile in the long grass waiting for me to place this autumn's seed order. Once the seed is in the ground they'll emerge from the undergrowth to have the last laugh. The other joker being the potential dryness of the seedbeds in August. Current rainfall patterns don't suggest anything but arid, cloddy seed beds more suited for cactus farming rather than anything else. Still, what's not to like about a shot of tequila? ●

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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