

Learning from adversity

"It's difficult to know what to do when you've just come through one of the most challenging seasons for a generation."

DR KIRSTY RICHARDS



What observations are there from a challenging season that may help growers to be better prepared for 2027 and beyond? *CPM* speaks to two crop variety experts for their thoughts on the options.

By Andrew Watts

After a difficult spring and summer, it may be hard to find any positives, but depending on the perspective and objectives, there should be some learnings to be found, suggests Agrii's John Miles.

In many cases, how specific varieties performed had more to do with conditions on-farm than the actual variety being grown, he adds. "For yellow rust, the worst variety was different for almost everybody – from Bamford to KWS Dawsum, to LG Beowulf, while for others

it was Champion or LG Typhoon.

"What did well for one underperformed for another. KWS Extase was poor for many but that wasn't due to yellow rust like the above, it was often a case of how the crop endured the heat. If there's one conclusion we can draw, it's that this season underlined the importance of having a mix of varieties with different characteristics."

Despite the dry season, disease remained a threat, but was highly localised, notes John. "Across the West,



Unusual year

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Exceeding expectations

How Arlington delivered a pleasant surprise for one north Norfolk grower

Put to the test

John Mack was pleasantly surprised with Arlington's yield this past harvest, and believes it must be a variety that can somewhat tolerate drought.



When John Mack harvested Arlington winter wheat at Pond Farm in Bodham this past season, the DSV variety had already made a strong impression. Despite dry conditions, it produced a promising yield, stood well and delivered an excellent sample, reinforcing his decision to grow it again next season.

Having been approached by DSV UK to produce an Arlington seed crop, John decided to manage it as a feed wheat, despite the variety being marketed as Group 1 milling variety. "I didn't treat it as a milling variety, we managed with a feed protocol, and that worked really nicely," he explains. "I think you could do either with it."

That flexibility is one of the features that's encouraged John to consider Arlington for the longer term. With its Group 1 milling classification, the variety offers growers the opportunity to produce quality wheat while

also providing a strong agronomic and yield package for the farm.

However for John, the variety's performance this season has demonstrated that it deserves a place in the rotation. This is because despite dry weather putting pressure on crops across the region, Arlington still produced a result that exceeded John's expectations.

"I was pleasantly surprised with the yield for this year with the dry times; I thought it was good. It must be a variety that can somewhat tolerate drought."

The crop also delivered an excellent specific weight – recording 79kg/hl, compared with 76kg/hl for the Champion winter wheat he grew elsewhere on the farm. As for the grain coming off the combine, John raises that it was a 'very good sample of wheat.'

He was also impressed by the variety's ease of management throughout the season. "It stood

well and didn't have any disease in it, with just a normal treatment. Our agronomist seemed happy."

John acknowledges that the dry season reduced disease pressure across the farm, but the crop nevertheless remained clean and upright, providing a straightforward harvest. The straw also performed well, with a growth regulator included in the crop management programme.

When comparing Arlington with the other wheat varieties on the farm, he's quick to point out that the crops were grown on different soil types. Arlington was on better land than Champion, making a direct yield comparison unfair. "It has yielded better than Champion, but that isn't all down to the variety.

"Even so, I think it's one of the best wheats I've grown lately. I'd tell other growers to give it a try, especially if they're already growing milling wheat," he concludes.



Risk management

According to Frontier Agriculture's Dr Kirsty Richards, the most important learning of the past two years is that risk has to be managed through a spread of varieties with different characteristics.

► crops exhibited high levels of septoria early, and in some areas, it was present all season, while in other areas it was yellow rust. Some had it persistent and bad, others not so much, but nationally it was a low-pressure year for foliar diseases," he says.

"The telltale signs of a lower-than-expected disease pressure year (yellow rust) was that many growers were able to grow varieties known to be poor for yellow rust with a standard three-spray programme of T0, T1 and T2 at normal timings. Where a pre-T0 was applied, it was often for logistical reasons, perhaps because growers had a large area to spray and needed to buy time later if conditions deteriorated," comments John.

CANDIDATE PROMISE

If there's one firm observation John is willing to draw from this season, it's that candidate varieties look promising.

"The newer material looks good, and they delivered on their earlier National List results, which heightens confidence in them."

So what have growers opted to sow this autumn and why? John believes it's largely a case of sticking with what's known while accepting there's a lack of money to buy a lot of new seed.

"Throughout the spring and summer events, our message was to remain with what performs. If money is tight, go with what you know works but don't overexpose yourself to the yellow rust risk. Remember the fundamentals when considering varieties such as drilling date and growth habit, septoria and rust risk, and end market considerations," he outlines.

Nonetheless, interest in new varieties remains buoyant as growers seek to move on from the established options that are starting to succumb to disease. "I think



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- ▶ LG Defiance will sell out this season and take big market share. Given that this is its first year, that's an extraordinary result.

"It needs watching for septoria and will benefit from a PGR, but despite this, its untreated yield of 95% of controls has clearly supported its appeal."

Other varieties securing grower interest include LG Challenger, KWS Scope and to a lesser extent, KWS Aintree – all Group 4 hard types. The Group 4 soft variety Sparkler has sold well for Agrii and RGT Hexton has enjoyed a good second year, highlights John.

PIQUING ATTENTION

Milling types were concentrated on last year's additions with both Group 2 KWS Arnie and Group 1 KWS Vibe proving popular. While Arlington from DSV looks promising, John notes it sold out quickly due to limited seed availability.

"Despite the economic difficulties of the season, it's clear that for different reasons, growers are trying to de-risk from the rust issues of Champion, Typhoon, Bamford and make the natural progression on from Extase. They're keen to look at some of the newer varieties.

"Challenger sold out in April and there's generally strong interest in last year's additions to the Recommended List," he adds.

Several of the candidates look especially promising with good septoria and BYDV resistance, raises John. "This bodes well for growers for the next few years."

For Frontier Agriculture's, Dr Kirsty Richards, the overriding lesson is the need to diversify risk. "Growers are understandably nervous about the season ahead and confidence is low. It's difficult to know what to do when you've just come through one of the most challenging seasons for a generation. There's little other option but to hope for a better year," she says.

"Wheat performance has varied significantly from farm to farm. Some growers have achieved yields close to, or even above, their long-term average, while others have experienced substantial reductions.

"The AHDB countrywide survey currently reports an average winter wheat yield of 6.8 t/ha, approximately 12% below the national five-year average. Crop quality has also been highly variable, creating additional storage and grain management challenges for some growers," notes Kirsty.

More flexibility for OSR

New spring OSR variety with pod shatter resistance

Growers will have a new option for establishing oilseed rape thanks to the impending launch of DSV UK's first spring variety with pod shatter resistance.

The new variety has completed two years of National List trials in the UK, where it's delivered strong performance. Offering early maturity, it's due to launch this spring, subject to the completion of necessary registration requirements.

This will be the first spring OSR variety to be introduced by DSV, marking an exciting development in the breeder's portfolio, explains UK sales and marketing manager, Sarah Hawthorne.

"Spring OSR can provide growers with an alternative establishment window, particularly where autumn drilling has been challenging or where growers are looking to introduce greater flexibility into their rotations.

"With the weather increasingly influencing establishment decisions, having the option to drill in the

spring can be valuable. Spring OSR offers an opportunity to establish a crop following the autumn, winter or early spring period, depending on conditions and the individual farm's rotation," she explains.

Early maturity is another important feature of the new variety, highlights Sarah. "By reaching maturity early, the variety could offer growers greater flexibility when planning harvest operations and managing workloads across the farm. Earlier maturity can also be valuable where growers are looking to bring harvest forward and make the most of available harvesting conditions."

While spring OSR doesn't remove the challenges associated with establishment, it can provide another tool for growers to consider when planning their cropping programme, she concludes.

Further information on its agronomic performance, yield potential and availability will be shared as the registration process progresses.

Performance varied greatly between the regions, but yields in the North and Central England tell a unique story. For context, trials in Northumberland in 2024 were the first to display signs of the Yr15 yellow rust race, which has since spread through the Midlands and East regions.

Commenting on AHDB trials results from the North, Kirsty says following a favourable drilling season and mild winter, many early-sown crops developed rapidly. "The highest-yielding varieties across AHDB trial sites in the region were Defiance (107% of treated controls), Sparkler (105%), Extase (105%) and Scope (105%), highlighting the strong performance of these varieties across a range of growing conditions," she adds.

Despite the disease pressure, drought and heatwaves of 2026, there are some observations of note with several varieties performing above their five-year average, highlights Kirsty. "Scope has performed surprisingly well despite the yellow rust pressure many crops faced. Arnie is another that's impressed. Aintree too has done well, but we see Defiance as the stronger variety of the two given its better yellow rust resistance."

Growers are increasingly using

varieties with good disease resistance as a management tool to help schedule spring spraying, she adds. "Defiance is an example of how growers can use varieties to help spread the autumn and spring workloads. Its height and straw strength mean it's better suited to late October drilling while its excellent yellow rust resistance will help spread the T1 spray workload."

While no one can say how next season will play out, there are facts that can't be ignored – a mild autumn means virus pressure will likely be high and there'll be disease, especially yellow rust, come the spring. "We increasingly require varieties with good BYDV resistance in wheat and tolerance in barley, and demand for these types gets stronger each year.

"Perhaps the most important learning of the past two years is that risk has to be managed through a spread of varieties with different characteristics.

"We're seeing more growers use varieties to manage yellow rust risk, but nor should we overlook the threat posed by septoria or lodging in a wet year. Several of the newer varieties are taller types and growers should be mindful of the need for a PGR," she concludes. ●