



OSR ESTABLISHMENT FOCUS PAYS DIVIDENDS FOR LINCOLNSHIRE TEAM

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Consistently reliable establishment is the overwhelming oilseed rape-growing priority for Jim Beeden and his Frontier agronomist, Jeremy Nicholson at Flagleaf Farming in North Lincolnshire.

As well as the key to the profitability of their second largest crop, it is an essential element in sustaining the performance of the first wheat mainstay of the 2800 ha arable business.

“Black-grass control is the driver of everything we do these days,” Jim pointed out. “Staying on top of it is vital to the sustainability of our whole business.

“As part of our battle against black-grass, around a third of our area is now in spring crops – mainly barley but also linseed, sugar beet, maize for AD and a small amount of spring wheat. We’re doing a lot more cover cropping too. Alongside this, we’re firmly focused on improving soil structure and drainage.

“Winter rape is also a major weapon in our armoury. It’s really competitive. It allows us to use very effective combinations of Centurion Max, Crawler and Kerb. And even last year with conditions were fairly well stacked against the crop, we averaged 4t/ha.

“Reliable 4t-plus yields make OSR one of our best margin-earners at current prices. Which is more than can be said for alternative cereal breaks. Three years ago beans were around a fifth of our cropping and did us well. However, we simply can’t make them work at the sort of prices available today.”

Jim Beeden and Jeremy Nicholson have no doubt that the secret of success with OSR – both in its own right and as a break crop – lies in its establishment. That’s why they set such store by the range of establishment-maximising techniques they continue to develop across the 500-700ha they grow annually; a recipe which delivered establishment rates of over 95% last autumn.

Together with top notch disease and pod shatter resistance, vigorous establishment ability is their first essential in variety choice for the greatest management flexibility and least risk.

At the same time, they have progressively improved their subsoiler leg-based seeding approach; are firm advocates of the most effective seedbed fertilisation; and are bringing the start of drilling forward to the first half of August to combat the threat of flea beetle.

“A good 80% of the challenge with winter rape is in its first few weeks,” stressed Jeremy Nicholson. “Getting the crop up and away rapidly and evenly gives us the head start we need in dealing with the many things that can set it back at its most vulnerable stage.

“It also means we have a far more black-grass competitive crop and altogether less worry, not to mention expense, in achieving the consistent 30 plants/m² we’re looking for at flowering.



“In vigorous establishment we haven’t found much that can rival DK Extrovert,” he explained. “It has been a good half of our 2017 crop and figures strongly in our mix for the coming season. Both it and the DK Exalte we’ve also been growing are notably rapid in their early development, making them especially well-suited to the second half our drilling window. Their strong combination of phoma and light leaf spot resistance also offers us valuable flexibility in our spraying programme.

“Alongside these, DK Exclaim has been our first choice for our earlier drilling. It’s also very vigorous and disease resistant but less rapid in its autumn growth and especially stiff-stemmed, both of which are more important for early drillers. We’ve had this alongside V316OL which we mainly grow for the HOLL premium.”

As they like to keep their eggs in several baskets, the FlagLeaf Farming team are going with DK Expansion as their principal variety for earlier drilling this autumn alongside long-time favourite, DK Extrovert for the main and later slots. They’re also sowing highly vigorous, DK Imperial CL for the first time this autumn on land prone to cranesbill and hedge mustard problems to take advantage of the Clearfield system.

All the crops will go in with an adapted 6m Vaderstad Rapid drill equipped with a Rapid Lift toolbar. This has proved a real step forward in establishment over the past year, giving excellent sowing depth control together with the least possible surface disturbance.

“We’ve been establishing our rape behind subsoiler legs for a long time now,” said Jim. “On our heavy soils, in particular, it’s vital to ensure good drainage and put the seed into a loosened zone that allows the best possible root penetration.

“Using simple seeders mounted on our Kverneland CTS and Challenger Agri units, we were originally sowing in front of the press. But switching our seeding to behind it gave us much better depth control, even though it meant double rolling was essential.

“We’ve reduced the variation in our sowing depth still further with the Rapid drill we’ve adapted to sow in two bands 125 mm apart behind each low disturbance leg set at 500 mm centres. The sowing coulters give us some nicely localised cultivation and very even depth in the fissured ground, with the press wheels following this up to ensure good seed-to-soil contact and trap the moisture released by the subsoiling.

“Removing the coulters we don’t need means we leave the soil surface between our twin bands of seed completely undisturbed to keep the black-grass asleep. The new set-up also means a single roll after drilling is perfectly adequate.”

Seedbed fertiliser is another area in which significant improvements are being made at Flagleaf Farming in pursuit of better OSR establishment. Sufficient nitrogen and phosphate have long been regarded as essentials in getting the crop underway, with liquids preferred to solids for their accuracy and immediate availability.



While the 16.5N, 33 P mixture was previously applied across the full drill width in front of the legs, for the first time last autumn every acre was sown with the fertiliser placed in bands immediately behind each leg and ahead of the double rows of seed. This concentrates the fertiliser where it's needed with easy reach of the developing roots without exceeding NVZ limits.

"We're really getting reliably even establishment these days," reported Jeremy. "This is a great boon too in giving us the confidence to consider reducing sowing rates from our current 50 seeds/m². This should make it easier for us to secure the most productive canopies.

"So far, thank heavens, we haven't had any major flea beetle problems here. But we're keen to keep ahead of any threat by moving drilling forward around a week from our normal August 18-20 start. With the establishment regime we've developed, we're now confident of securing the right seedbed conditions and sufficient moisture even after a dry summer.

"In doing this, time is our biggest challenge as most of our OSR follows wheat or spring barley. To give us the greatest leeway for earlier sowing, alongside Skyfall and Siskin we're considering replacing Revelation with an earlier-maturing wheat like Graham. We'll probably also increase our winter barley acreage, as the hybrids we've been trying out are proving a useful extra tool in combatting black-grass.

"We're paying particular attention to managing straw residues ahead of our rape too. It needs to be well chopped and spread for the most even drilling and to avoid the sort of protective mat that's almost impossible to get slug pellets through.

"While it does have time implications, we're baling and removing more of our spring barley straw to swap for muck these days as it's so difficult to reliably chop."

Jim Beeden and Jeremy Nicolson agree that OSR establishment takes a lot of getting right and they don't claim to have all the answers yet by any means. However, they have no doubt that they've made major progress in getting the essentials right for their conditions in recent years. And they're continually fine-tuning as many aspects of their management as they can to progressively improve their field-to-field and year-to-year consistency.

"Winter rape isn't a cheap crop to grow," stressed Jim. "But providing we get it established right we know we can manage it successfully through the season to make a decent contribution to our bottom line and, as importantly, to the black-grass management crucial to the profitability of our Number One earner, first wheat."