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Early drilled wheat

Getting ahead

With the recent washout autumn proving a stark reminder of the volatilities of Mother Nature, some growers will be conscious to drill winter cereals as early as realistically viable, to avoid missing out altogether. *CPM* speaks to experts to understand the pros and cons.

By Janine Adamson

As the saying goes – once bitten, twice shy. And given autumn 2023 affected most growers in one way or another, namely through the inability to drill winter cereals due to relentless wet weather, some may be questioning a return to early drilling to avoid a repeat performance.

While experts advise simply holding out until optimum planting conditions arise, for some, a combination of the right variety and appropriate management techniques mean going early could yield positive results.

NIAB's variety specialist, Clare Leaman, believes it'd be easy to outright discourage growers from this approach, but given the difficulties of the past year, she fully acknowledges the pressure to get on as soon as the land permits.

“The advice would always be to avoid farming for the year that's just happened and to instead focus on the year ahead. Two back-to-back wet autumns would be very unlucky, but we seem to experience such weather extremes – it's a complete lottery.

“Either way, there has to be an awareness of problems that may be incurred as a result of changing drilling date, the main one being blackgrass control. Afterall, this is one of the primary reasons why growers shifted to planting winter wheat later,” she explains.

For those forging ahead, Clare believes the first step is to select an appropriate variety given some wheats are genetically suited to early drilling. “Certain farms with large hectarages will be familiar with this as they can't avoid having to plant some areas first, so it's simply a case of ordering the different varieties they have in the shed based on a per-field basis.”

Close attention

“Whereas for others who are perhaps returning to an earlier date or trying it for the first time, they'll have to specifically choose varieties to accommodate an early approach, paying particular attention to agronomic attributes and disease scores.

“Don't assume that any left-over seed in the shed from last season will fit the bill – be sure it's suitable for the given timing,” stresses Clare.

So what are the key things to consider when picking a variety for an earlier

drilling slot? First off, because the crop is in the ground for longer, this means there's a greater risk of lodging therefore stiff straw is a must, says Clare.

Then, the earlier a wheat crop is drilled, the more susceptible it is to septoria. “Research undertaken by AHDB explores how septoria disease resistance shifts in response to drilling date. The work suggests that compared with the Recommended List ratings, on average, early sowing (average 22 September) decreases the effective rating/score by approximately 0.6.

“Therefore, aiming for the highest septoria score you can to begin with will help to offset that a little,” she suggests.



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► The third consideration is speed of development, which Clare says is integral to avoid forward or fast developing crops. Instead, slower moving varieties are better.

“Without these three aspects, you can expect to face more septoria and a high risk of lodging. Also, for those in areas with grassweed issues, there’ll undoubtedly be higher blackgrass pressure as a result of drilling early.”

On the market since 2022, Group 4 hard wheat LG Typhoon offers the above criteria and more, believes Limagrain’s Ron Granger. And whereas it doesn’t deliver the same blockbuster yields as others on the RL, it instead has a secure package to support both early and conventional drilling slots.



One of LG Typhoon’s stand-out qualities is its septoria resistance, scoring 7.2.

“It yields consistently across all regions and performs well as a robust second wheat too. But where it really stands out is its septoria resistance (7.2) – one of the highest scores available – which has really been put to the test this season,” he continues.

All-rounder

“Equally, it has stiff straw scoring 7s for resistance to lodging both with and without a PGR, has OWBM resistance, and is high tillering. It’s a great all-rounder.”

Being slow off the blocks, Typhoon is ideally suited for those looking to drill early, suggests Ron. “It’s very prostrate in growth habit and develops steadily. This is important because you don’t want forward varieties going into late winter or the early spring as they’re more vulnerable to frost damage; even more so in the North where early drilling is common due to weather constraints,” he says.

“But just because it’s slow doesn’t mean a compromise on ear fertility or tillering – both are good and consistent to deliver quality at harvest.”

According to Ron, it’s the rounded package of agronomic traits which will have grower appeal. “This security offsets the fact Typhoon isn’t the highest yielding. But importantly, you don’t have to drill the variety early, it’s grows well planted at a conventional timing too.

“It’s just not suited for later drilling within a high blackgrass scenario. It develops too slowly to compete with the weed pressure and better varieties undoubtedly exist for those situations,” he adds.

In terms of what growers are familiar

with, Ron says Typhoon is a Claire replacement – the historic variety associated with early drilling – but appears to have improved agronomics. However, this doesn’t mean a relaxed approach to crop inputs.

“Agronomic strategies have to change if opting to drill early, particularly for fungicides and PGR programming and timings. Planning ahead is critical,” he stresses.

Clare concurs: “Design spring fungicide programmes accordingly to accommodate a hit on the septoria score, and be fully aware of the risks involved. Furthermore, there’s no guarantee of an earlier harvest, that’s not the purpose of early drilling,” she says.

Farmacy agronomist based in the Lincolnshire Wolds, Richard Jackson, agrees that Typhoon’s characteristics appeal. “I’ve been looking after Typhoon for a couple of years now and find it’s a reliable all-rounder.

“One of the main concerns with earlier drilling is that it exacerbates septoria pressure, and with the wet springs we’ve been experiencing recently in the East, you can see high pressure on those early drilled crops. Typhoon’s high septoria score is reassuring.”

Of the varieties currently available on the RL, Richard says he tends to only have confidence in one or two when it comes to planting early, and believes Typhoon is perfectly suited to the early window.

“Many new varieties are better for later drilling, but there are fewer options to support earlier planting while instilling confidence that they’ll be standing at the end. But again, Typhoon is very strong in this area,” he adds.

Growing Typhoon for seed

Steve and Mark Ulyott of Farfields at Middleton-on-the-Wolds in Yorkshire have been growing LG Typhoon as a seed crop for Wynnstay for two years. The brothers farm across both Farfields (base) and land shared with Jonathan and Peter Walker at Manor House Farm in Lund.

Drilling around 42ha in total this year across all of the farm's seed contracts, Steve says they prefer to stick with one variety rather than chop and change. "With low grassweed pressure on some of our land we can confidently drill from mid-September onwards. Our preferred variety was KWS Grafton which is no longer available and we struggled to find a replacement.

"Having tried different varieties which didn't work for us, we finally had success with Typhoon," he explains.

Among Steve's feedback is although Typhoon doesn't combine as early as Grafton, it's a solid performer. "It's also midge resistant (OWBM) which is a must, it's just not worth the risk of choosing a variety without it.

"With a solid disease package there doesn't appear to be any obvious flaws other than its lack of competitiveness with grassweeds, but given it's planted on clean land, this shouldn't prove an issue," he says.

Furthermore, Steve believes growing Typhoon this season helped to boost the brothers' chances of getting drilled up across the business' 270ha, which otherwise might not have been the case due to the inclement weather many experienced.

The rotation includes winter wheat, winter

barley and vining peas across both free-draining 'Wold' land and heavier clay soils. Steve says the latter can be quite unforgiving. "The stronger land we farm, which happens to be for our seed crops, doesn't offer many days to travel so we can experience few good drilling days which puts pressure on workloads across the whole area.

"Yes we acknowledge the yield compromise of Typhoon but appreciate the ability to drill early more, which alleviates that pressure – it's a trade-off we're willing to take – we'd rather have the confidence and flexibility."

Whereas last year Typhoon was grown solely as a first wheat crop, this season, half of its area is down to second wheat. "The second wheats were drilled early October and went in well during a rare weather window. So far it looks pretty good which demonstrates the flexibility of the variety.

"Because we're growing for seed, our primary aim is to have the crop standing strong at harvest. This can be a challenge due to having livestock including B&B pigs, meaning we have a lot of muck and slurry, including FYM produced by the Walker's Rossellie Herd of Limousines, which makes for fertile land.

"As a result, we have to monitor all of our crops carefully and pay attention to PGR requirements as the weeks progress," he explains. "Typhoon's short, stiff straw is a positive in this situation."

Equally, Steve believes the variety's disease ratings have provided a much welcomed buffer when it comes to fungicide applications



According to Steve Ulyott, Typhoon's disease ratings make it more forgiving than other varieties which helps when prioritising field work.

recently. "It's more forgiving than other varieties which helps when prioritising field-work; it has excellent scores for both septoria (7.2) and yellow rust (9)."

But with Typhoon being a slow mover compared with other varieties, does this ever concern Steve? "Its spring growth can be frustrating because it's not moving when other varieties are. But if you're aware of that, it shouldn't be unexpected," he points out.

"With so many influencing factors these days, it's understanding your varieties, their associated trade-offs and acting accordingly. We appreciate the ability to spread our workloads and avoid a struggle when combining. Typhoon offers all of this," concludes Steve.

Richard admits yield-wise, it's middle of the road. "It doesn't offer outstanding yield but it does tiller well despite being slow developing, which may surprise some."

Also supporting Typhoon is Wynnstay's Matt Shand, who says the company has been a strong supporter of the variety since it first joined the RL. "For the past two years I've always thought Typhoon looked outstanding in trials and has a very high untreated yield score to back this up.

"A lot of varieties are suffering this season with the high disease pressure, however, Typhoon appears to be withstanding this better than others. Equally, something to consider is how consistent its yield has been during the past few years across the seasons and regions," he explains.

Matt agrees with Limagrain's early

drilling position for Typhoon: "It has the right agronomic characteristics in this slot even at lower seed rates because of its tillering ability and slow plant development.

"You can see from yield data that it performs very favourably and certainly when promoting an early drilling variety this year to our customers, Typhoon will be one of our top picks."

So do the experts believe growers will want to jump the gun this coming season? "I won't be encouraging my growers to drill early purely off the back of the tough autumn we faced last year," says Richard.

"But you have to start somewhere and in that early slot I'm looking for varieties with good standing ability and a robust agronomic package; Typhoon certainly ticks those boxes," he concludes. ■

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