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Fit for the Future

Merit still to later drill

In a year where the general trends are pointing towards earlier drilling, experts say there are many benefits of the later slot which shouldn’t be overlooked. *CPM* finds out more.

By Charlotte Cunningham

There’s an old adage in agriculture which says you shouldn’t farm for the previous year. While this makes sense on paper, the scars of the washout 2023 drilling campaign run deep for many and as such, have made plans for decidedly earlier drilling this year.

Of course, this is in stark contrast to the general shift in direction during the past few years, with many seeking those later sown advantages – namely, weed control – and these are benefits which shouldn’t be forgotten despite the challenges of last season, says KWS’ Olivia Bacon.

“Late-drilled winter wheat has a lot going for it from both agronomic and economic viewpoints, and the development of varieties that can produce almost all of their genetic yield potential when drilled as late as February makes the case very compelling.”

Although growers are no doubt eager to get seed in the ground to avoid the

same fate as last season, Ceres Rural’s Beth Ashley stresses the importance of them holding their nerve. “This year we’re telling all of our clients to just be patient, but understandably after last autumn, many have been keen to get going so they’re not in the same situation again.”

One of the biggest benefits of delayed drilling is grassweed control – particularly blackgrass, says Beth. “Stats indicate that 70% of blackgrass populations emerge mid-September to mid-October. From the 20 October onwards this reduces to 30%, so if you can delay drilling – particularly in high weed pressure areas or a second wheat situation – then it will hugely help with overall control.”

Minimising BYDV risk

There are also disease control advantages, she continues. “Especially barley yellow dwarf virus (BYDV), there’s a reduced risk the further into October you drill, as it takes much longer for the 170-degree days to be reached.”

Septoria can also be mitigated by drilling later, she adds. “With earlier drilled wheat there’s a higher septoria risk in the spring which will then also increase costs during this period due to fungicide requirements.”

But should Mother Nature be unkind once again this autumn, how late is too late? Olivia advises that if growers haven’t managed to drill prior to Christmas, it may be more economically viable to switch to spring wheat varieties. “But the ongoing shortage of wheat will continue to keep domestic prices

firm, whereas an oversupply of spring barley could easily reduce prices and make it very much a buyers’ market.

“With wheat, producers can load the dice even more in their favour by growing a ‘dynamic’ variety which, as well as producing high yields, will allow them to take advantage of added value markets which again are likely to be under-supplied.”

To get the best from later drilled crops, there are a few key management considerations to take on board, says



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Dawsium maintains its yield regardless of drilling slot, averaging 106% when drilled early, 103% in the mainstream window and 103% when late sown.

Beth. "Seedbed conditions are so important especially for herbicide efficacy. Residual herbicides require moisture and with the rainfall in September largely being quite sporadic and localised, it'll be vital to ensure there's enough moisture prior to drilling."

"Structurally, ensuring a nice fine seedbed also helps. On heavier soils, blackgrass prefers the wetter areas, so consider drilling those last."

Olivia adds: "Late drilled wheat can recover amazingly well but the seedbed quality still has to be fairly decent. Nothing lacks competition against blackgrass more than late, slow thin wheat."

Beth says something she's advising her

clients is to operate a traffic light system when it comes to scheduling drilling. "Fields that are cleaner – green fields – are ones which should be drilled first, and then the red, worst affected fields are drilled last."

"When you delay drilling even further in the worst impacted fields you are able to create better stale seedbeds, encourage a chit and then spray it off, which will significantly impact control levels."

Once drilled, it's important to note that germination in particularly cold and wet soils will be slower and behind normal sowings with regard to tiller numbers and size, says Olivia. "We really have to kick these plants on as early as conditions allow, to get nutrition into the crop for

more tillers to be formed and the existing ones to be strengthened. Fertiliser type and timing are critical to make sure availability is there early in the spring."

"Septoria should be less of an issue as the disease has less time to develop but growers should keep an eye out for any early rusts or mildew developing," she points out.

But regardless of whether you choose to drill early or late, it's vital to consider the key agronomic characteristics required for a variety to be suitable for either slot, notes Olivia. "Understanding the best wheat varieties for your preferred drilling window will help you to maximise your potential."

Looking at the offerings from KWS that

Learnings from Stow Longa

With Agrii's Rotations trial site at Stow Longa now in its tenth year, John Miles says it continues to deliver helpful learning opportunities for best practice – particularly with regard to weed control. "Last year we had quite high levels of blackgrass – 300 heads/m² in the worst-case scenarios and down to 50-0 in the best areas," he explains.

"At Stow Longa we know that typically 100 ears of blackgrass equals 1t/ha yield loss – so controlling the weeds as best we can is really important."

In terms of how this is done, delaying drilling – and creating space for stale seedbeds – is vital. "Wheat is a very expensive crop to grow in a good year, but if you allow poor weed control to reduce yield then it becomes a very expensive loss-making crop very quickly."

"The key drivers of the continued success of the ploughed area are weed control and

consistent crop establishment," explains John. "The ground is ploughed and pressed after harvest and left. The next thing that goes through is a drill – which is more than likely a very low disturbance disc drill."

"What we're doing in that situation is making our seedbed, leaving it to green up and then literally slotting some seed into it."

According to John, in autumn 2023 there were problems with the continual ploughing. "It didn't plough very nicely and wasn't very level – so we had to put a power harrow through and in some of the winter wheat blocks you could see more blackgrass where there had been an extra pass."

"The minute you disturb the soil, you get another flush, so if you can, set the field up early and then go in – with minimal disturbance – to try and stitch the seed in," he says.

Careful management and leaving that ground to green up as much as possible prior to drilling is going to be even more important this year with high blackgrass dormancy predicted, he warns. "If there are high levels of blackgrass dormancy, good seedbeds are going to be vital because we'll be asking a lot from herbicides. We're not likely to get a huge flush prior to drilling – but we will get some. We are currently five weeks from cultivation to signs of blackgrass emergence. Stow lessons suggest six weeks is the minimum gap from cultivation to drilling."

"That said, we have to recognise that there's likely to be a knee-jerk reaction to last year and growers will want to get on earlier than usual. However, Stow has definitely taught us to start our preparations early and not fiddle around with the ground prior to drilling to achieve the best possible control."



Lessons from *Stow Longa* have highlighted the importance of delaying drilling – and creating space for stale seedbeds – is vital, says Agrii's John Miles.



Group 4 Cranium has been around for several years, and it's really found favour as a late sown specialist variety.

► do particularly well in that later slot, Olivia says KWS Cranium continues to excel. "Group 4 Cranium has been around for several years, and it's really found favour as a late sown specialist variety."

This comes largely down to its yield when later sown (after 1 November) which tops the charts at 104%. This is in addition to a robust disease package and a vigorous plant type. This vigour is particularly beneficial for those who direct drill, she adds.

"In trials which compare conventionally drilled and direct drilled wheat, Cranium showed the least amount of difference in yield – so that's another little niche which may be attractive to growers looking to minimise their all-round risk."

Flexibility

For those looking for something with ultimate flexibility when it comes to drilling date, KWS Dawsum is likely to tick a lot of boxes, she continues. "Dawsum maintains its yield regardless of drilling slot, averaging 106% when drilled early, 103% in the mainstream window and 103% when late sown."

"Like Cranium, Dawsum also boasts a strong disease package and high untreated yields – alongside excellent grain quality and high specific weight – rightly earning it the nickname 'Awesome Dawsum'."

In Suffolk, Dawsum's performance in its inaugural year on farm has more than impressed Michael Craske of H. H. Craske and Son – so much so that the family have increased its sowing area by a third, a total of 100ha, this autumn.

"This was our first season with Dawsum; the previous year we didn't even consider

it," he explains. "On reflection, that was a mistake as its strong agronomic performance, high specific weight and yield make it an excellent choice."

The variety was drilled as a first wheat following beans at the end of September through an 8m Vaderstad Rapid drill pulled by a Caterpillar 845, on land which had been min-tilled using discs and a Kongskilde Vibro Flex heavy duty stubble cultivator, recalls Michael.

"It was also drilled as a second wheat at two different timings, into ploughed land during mid-October and at the end of November on land that was ploughed and then immediately followed with a 4m KRM combination drill."

Tracking the journey of Dawsum on farm throughout the season, Michael says he was impressed from the get-go with the variety standing up well against disease. "The cold, wet weather during the season meant septoria was an issue across all varieties. However, the disease pressure on Dawsum was less than for some others because of its excellent yellow rust and brown rust resistance.

"The variety tillered strongly and covered the ground well, helping to suppress grassweeds. In early spring it seemed to hold back slightly then developed well, but without becoming too lush."

Despite an incredibly challenging year – one which saw 120mm of rain in a month – Dawsum delivered at harvest, too, says Michael. "We combined our 120ha of oilseed rape at the end of July and started the winter wheats on 5 August. Dawsum was harvested in mid-August.

"Most of it was grown as a first wheat and yielded 9t/ha, but even in the second wheat

slot it averaged 8.5t/ha with a specific weight of 79kg/hl. Overall, yields were slightly down on our long-term average but amazing considering the challenging weather for so much of the season." ■

Fit for the Future

In this series of articles, *CPM* has teamed up for the seventh year with KWS to explore how the cereals market may evolve, and profile growers set to deliver ongoing profitability. The aim is to focus on the unique factors affecting variety performance, to optimise this and maximise return on investment.

It highlights the value plant genetics can now play in variety selection as many factors are heavily influenced and even fixed by variety choice.

KWS is a leading breeder of cereals, oilseeds, sugar beet and maize. As a family-owned business, it's truly independent and entirely focussed on promoting success through the continual improvement of varieties with higher yields, strong disease and pest resistance, and excellent grain quality. KWS is as committed to your future just as much as you are.

