

# A green shade of gold



*“Paying attention to detail will ensure more consistent yields over time.”*

NIGEL SCOTT

Key to maximising oilseed rape output is the longevity of the crop’s green area index, but following last year’s difficult season there might be temptation to take a minimalist approach. *CPM* explores why it’s always worth investing in this crop.

By *Melanie Jenkins*

**A** far more favourable growing season means that those who’ve planted oilseed rape are likely seeing much healthier crops than last year. However, managing both green area index and green leaf area can help growers to capitalise on this improvement further.

Looking back at autumn 2023, it was a devastating establishment period for OSR, especially in the North of England, where ProCam’s Nigel Scott recalls half the planted area being lost. “I rarely write crops off but the pressure from cabbage stem flea beetle that autumn was biblical. Those crops that

survived weren’t great, and then the dull conditions in June and July meant seeds were small and yields were low.”

## PLANTING DECLINE

The kick-back from this was that some growers decided to not take the risk in 2024/2025, with estimating plantings in Nigel’s area down by 10%, he says. “However, others recognise OSR as a useful and profitable option. If you can grow it and achieve a good margin, it’s a true break crop and helps control grassweeds.

“Those who committed may have drilled a little early, opening

the door for clubroot, but many crops haven’t required insecticides and so have thrived. The situation



## Justified concerns

Because of the contrast between the 2023/2024 and 2024/2025 seasons, ProCam’s Nigel Scott fears some might take a ‘low input, low risk’ approach to OSR crops.

## Resurrecting spring OSR

Why a strong spring OSR portfolio can have a high margin potential

In recent years, the area of winter oilseed rape has declined rapidly, but its capacity to be one of the best and most profitable break crops means its loss on many farms hasn't gone unnoticed. So, could the lesser-grown spring OSR provide a worthy alternative?

ProCam's Lee Harker believes it could, noting that in an ideal world, more OSR would be grown. "The UK uses 2M tonnes but we only produce 1M tonnes and this year the figure could be lower.

"Spring OSR offers an alternative – it's a true break crop, has a different herbicide programme, doesn't require special treatment, and helps spread the workload."

With the introduction of its Clearfield hybrid Cocktail CL, DSV now has five of the six varieties on the 2025/26 AHDB Descriptive List for spring OSR and remains committed to the crop, says Sarah Hawthorne of DSV.

"Current high prices, a shortage of UK-grown OSR, and the desire to find profitable alternatives to cereals are driving growing interest in spring sown OSR," she highlights.

"While it's been a niche crop in the UK, two-thirds of global OSR production is drilled in the spring. With lower growing costs than winter OSR and strong prices, spring OSR is capable of delivering a healthy margin in many regions. Avoiding



### Widespread appeal

Current high prices, a shortage of UK-grown OSR, and the desire to find profitable alternatives to cereals are driving growing interest in spring-sown OSR, says DSV's Sarah Hawthorne.

the variable establishment problems of autumn and winter, it can achieve realistic yields of around 3t/ha."

Alongside Cocktail, the DSV portfolio includes varieties like Lakritz, Lumen, Contra CL, and Crazy CL.

"The UK range offers yields as high as 103% of controls, with three Clearfield varieties. We're also focused on more robust plant types that are resilient to biotic and abiotic stress."

Sarah adds that Contra CL, Cocktail CL, and Crazy CL are tolerant to imidazolinone herbicides, making for valuable tools in weed control. "DSV Crazy also has clubroot resistance, while DSV Lakritz remains the highest-yielding spring OSR variety."

Lee points out that it might be tempting to plant spring OSR as a backup crop and leave it to its own devices. "However, attention to detail is key – if you're going to grow it, do it well and achieve the best results."

Managing spring-sown OSR differs from winter OSR in several ways, stresses Sarah. "Sowing should occur in optimal conditions for rapid, even emergence; it's better to wait for the best seedbed conditions rather than sow early. Spring OSR develops fewer branches than winter crops, so higher plant densities are advised—aim for 60-80 seeds/m<sup>2</sup>, depending on soil conditions and sowing date, from mid-March to mid-April."

### SEEDBED CONDITIONS

"A firm, moist seedbed is preferable whereas wet, cold land should be cultivated to ensure the topsoil warms and dries before drilling," she adds.

Ideally, soil temperatures should be between 2-3°C to support germination, advises Lee. "Spring OSR takes longer to germinate than winter OSR, so ensure the seedbed has warmed up before sowing."

An early application of 80-100kgN/ha is recommended after planting, followed by 40kgN/ha at stem elongation, explains Sarah. "Like winter OSR, spring OSR has high demands for sulphur and boron. Apply 20-30kgSO<sub>3</sub>/ha early, and 300-400gB/ha before flowering."

"Also, ensure adequate phosphorus, potassium, and magnesium to maximise yields. Typical uptakes



### Attention to detail

ProCam's Lee Harker says attention to detail is key with spring OSR and it should be grown well to achieve the best results.

are 50-70kgP<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub>/ha, 160kgK<sub>2</sub>O/ha, and 50kgMgO/ha," she adds.

Weed and insect control require particular care, she notes. "The herbicides used for winter OSR are generally suitable for spring crops. For fields with high volunteer pressure or difficult weeds, products like clomazone, metazachlor, or clopyralid may be effective, although it's crucial to check labels for spring suitability."

Lee highlights the benefit of using herbicides different from those in a cereal rotation. "Actives like clomazone, metazachlor, or clopyralid are often suitable, but always check labels as some products may not be recommended for spring OSR."

Insect pests are harder to manage, suggests Sarah. "Flea beetles (*Phyllotreta* spp.) must be monitored after sowing. Their damage can resemble that of cabbage stem flea beetle (CSFB), so caution is required.

"Pollen beetle can also pose a problem – they migrate to spring crops after winter crops flower, so they're a larger threat to spring-sown crops. Remain vigilant and take appropriate action where necessary."

However, Lee advises against spraying for pollen beetle once flowering starts. "It harms beneficial insects and once the crop flowers, the beetle becomes a beneficial itself."

PGRs are generally unnecessary, and input use tends to be lower than with winter OSR, which helps offset the lower yields, says Sarah. "Spring OSR also provides a valuable tool in blackgrass management by adding a spring crop into the rotation."



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now is the opposite to what we experienced last spring.”

Last year, many crops were patchy with a low green area index, but as of early February, Nigel has observed GAI of 3 in places. “You couldn’t have two more different years sequentially.”

Because of this contrast, he fears some might take a ‘low input, low risk’ approach to their OSR crops. However, he stresses that OSR must be managed carefully to maximise its potential. “With prices on the rise – north of £400/t – you want to maximise your crops, not just settle for the bare minimum.

“I understand many may have lost out financially last year and don’t want to spend this season, but we can’t farm according to last year’s conditions. We must treat this year as fresh, focusing on agronomy on a field-by-field basis.”

Yara’s Natalie Wood agrees that this season has provided more favourable conditions but notes there’ll be more variability out there after the winter. “Variability can occur within fields, which can create challenges when deciding how to approach a crop.”

First and foremost, Nigel advises growers to assess their weed burden and herbicide applications. “The majority of crops in the North have had a broadleaf and grassweed herbicide, and what I’ve seen looks clean.

“Be aware that clopyralid, the active in Korvetto (clopyralid+ halauxifen-methyl) and Shield Pro (clopyralid), shouldn’t have been applied until 1 March. You also won’t have been



## Feeding the plants

Yara’s Natalie Wood advises using a fertiliser that provides both nitrate and sulphur because OSR is hungry for sulphur.



## Off to a good start

Many crops have done well so far this season with a green area index of 3 in February.

able to apply Kerb (propyzamide) and Astrokerb (aminopyralid+ propyzamide) since the end of January, so you’ve been in a ‘no man’s land’ for herbicides during that period. But be cautious when you do go into a crop, ensuring it’s before green buds emerge.”

He then suggests assessing crop biomass with tools such as FieldSense. “If GAI is 1 or less in early spring, apply nitrogen, but if it’s above 3, it might not be necessary. It’s all about measuring and managing appropriately.”

## CROP UNIFORMITY

Alternatively, growers can use Atfarm, Yara’s digital software, to create variable rate maps to even out growth, says Natalie. “We’re aiming to maintain GAI between 3 and 4, and the first nitrogen application will help to achieve a more uniform crop.

“Using the Atfarm app also helps track nitrogen uptake which allows adjustments based on overwinter mineralisation,” she adds. “Ammonium nitrate is immediately available to the plant while urea must go through several stages before it becomes

available to plants. In cases where crops are behind, the sooner nitrogen becomes available, the better.”

It’s also crucial to assess disease which will be influenced by the weather, suggests Nigel. “I’ve seen some light leaf spot so far but it’s important to anticipate potential challenges rather than react once disease has spread.”

When considering plant growth regulators (PGRs), he emphasises that OSR can be easily manipulated. “For forward crops, PGRs can keep the growing point down, minimising height and encouraging root mass development.

“If the crop is already large, any product with metconazole will regulate growth, best applied early in the season. For later regulation, at green bud stage, use a PGR fungicide like metconazole or Toprex (difenoconazole+ paclobutrazol). This will open the canopy and promote lateral branching, which is ideal because we want a dense canopy to maximise pods and seeds.”

Nigel suggests tissue testing regularly to maintain nutrition, as OSR requires



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▶ more frequent testing than cereals. “OSR requires boron and molybdenum, so test for these and address any other deficiencies promptly.”

Sulphur is also vital and should be applied early and in small, frequent doses, he says. “Be mindful of leaching risks to avoid losing the benefits of the application while remaining environmentally conscious. Peak sulphur uptake occurs later in the OSR season, but is required for efficient nitrogen use. If applied early, don’t overdo it, as excessive sulphur can hinder boron and molybdenum uptake.”

Natalie advises using a fertiliser that provides both nitrate and sulphate. “OSR is hungry for sulphur which improves overall

nutrient use efficiency.”

She adds that at the end of flowering, applying foliar nitrogen can help to extend the green area duration, she says. “The plant’s pods can photosynthesise, so extending the green period with foliar nitrogen, such as Nufol, can increase yields by up to 0.3t/ha.”

## BOOSTING ROOTING

In cases of poorer crops, Nigel recommends phosphite to encourage rooting. “Later in the season, consider biostimulants like pidolic acid during flowering when nitrogen can be an issue. This can help to maintain green leaf area which supports seed pod filling and improves nitrogen

efficiency. A late-season foliar nitrogen application, just as petals fall off, can raise oil content and yields.”

Finally, Nigel addresses insect concerns, noting that pollen beetle isn’t a significant problem in the North. “I’m reluctant to use insecticides on OSR because they often don’t provide comprehensive control due to resistance, and they could make the situation worse due to their effects on beneficial insects.”

When it comes to OSR management, consistency is key, he reminds. “Rotation plays a large role, with wider rotations leading to larger yields. Equally, paying attention to detail will ensure more consistent output over time,” concludes Nigel. ●

## A spring in the step

### Spring oilseed rape finds a valuable place in the rotation

One farmer has taken the decision to introduce spring oilseed rape to his rotation after the risks of growing a winter crop superseded the gains. Andrew Pope farms 180ha at Longfold Farm, Bretherton, between Preston and Southport, and up until 2022 was growing winter wheat, barley, oats and OSR, plus spring-sown peas and beans.

However, since then the rotation has consisted of winter wheat, plus spring-planted barley, oats, beans and OSR. So what prompted the shift from predominantly winter to spring crops?

“We were growing winter OSR on the farm from the late 1970s, achieving anything from below to above average yields. In fact, in 2019 and 2022, we had record-breaking crops of more than 5.5/ha.

“But in 2024 we had undoubtedly the worst yield we’d ever seen – I don’t think what we harvested even covered the cost of the fuel to combine it. OSR had often fell foul of pests such as slugs, pigeons and CSFB, but these, combined with the wet August and September followed by a severe lack of sunlight, gave the crop little chance.”

Prior to this, Andrew planted spring OSR in 2023 following the poor establishment of a winter crop, yielding a very different outcome. “We’ve grown it from time to time previously when our

rotation had become out of sync and it’s proved successful.”

So what does he believe is key to a bountiful spring planting? When it comes to variety choice, Clearfield is a must, stresses Andrew. “Click was the variety we chose to plant in 2024 after spraying the ground with glyphosate. We stripped drilled 25ha on 9 May into firm ground to assure seed-to-soil contact, with two thirds of the total N applied down the front legs, while slug pellets were administered behind, and this was then followed with a heavy roller.”

After what appeared to be a slow start, he says the crop established well after some timely rain. “After that it went from strength to strength, even a good few weeks after flowering,” explains Andrew. “We have hives on site for a local beekeeper and we could hear the bees working late into the evenings.”

The crop had a single insecticide spray along with manganese, followed by an application of Cleravo (imazamox+ quinmerac) with Dash HC surfactant. It later had a light fertiliser top dressing, bringing the total N to 110kg/ha, with inputs rounded up via a flowering spray for sclerotinia and a top up of foliar N on 18 July.

“The crop yielded between 2.08-2.2t/ha, selling for £450/t into a local wild bird feed market,” says Andrew. “Plus, the straw was baled by a neighbouring dairy



### A viable alternative

Andrew Pope decided to introduce spring OSR to his rotation after the risks of growing a winter crop superseded the gains.

farm in exchange for slurry.”

The farm’s approach to rotations now is to be open minded, with spring OSR a crop Andrew will consider growing again in 2025, should it be required, he says. “It’s good to have spring OSR in our arsenal because it can be drilled late in any circumstance and is easy to manage, more so than winter OSR.

“Spring OSR also helps to spread harvest pressure, usually falling between any spring cereals and spring beans, all while providing a good break crop and potential volunteer over-winter companion crop to winter cereals,” he concludes.