

Why grow winter Oilseed rape?

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After a very difficult start to drilling and a difficult autumn last year, some growers have been asking if they should continue growing oilseed rape, according to ProCam's Nick Myers. He says that the answer is simple in so far as winter oilseed rape is still a profitable break crop to grow and it fits well into an arable rotation, adding to the whole enterprise profitability.

"Management focus on most arable farms tends to be on wheat, but profitability of the farm should be calculated across the whole rotation. This means that the break crop you choose needs to be profitable in its own right and its cost of production should be below its selling price," he says.

"According to our gross margin calculations, a crop of oilseed rape stands a much greater chance of achieving a profitable gross margin compared to spring or winter beans and some crops of peas."

He explains that, for example, a crop of winter oilseed rape yielding 3.5 t/ha this harvest would have a variable cost of production per tonne of around £130. "Next year when the lower fertiliser prices are taken into account, this should reduce to around £107/t. Higher yields, of course, will reduce costs of production further. Generally, oilseed rape costs per tonne – even when Overhead Costs are included - tend to be below current market prices. However, beans will need a price of around £140/t to turn a profit even at yields of 5 t/ha."

Nick points out that oilseed rape is a valuable break crop, offering growers the opportunity to use herbicides from different groups and so introduce alternative modes of action into the whole farm herbicide programme. "With resistance escalating and active ingredients such as IPU and trifluralin being lost, the pressure is on to control black-grass cost-effectively right across the rotation. In many situations this will mean considering your options in rape more carefully."

For example, says Nick, metazachlor and dimethenamid-p, both active ingredients along with qunimerac in the herbicide Shadow, offer activity on black-grass and are at low risk for developing black-grass resistance. "Applied pre-/ early post emergence Shadow offers an excellent start to the black-grass control programme."

In addition Shadow will also rid the crop of the more difficult to control broad-leaved weeds such as Cleavers, Crane's-bill and Poppy as well as offering useful control of other problem weeds such as Sow-thistle.

Commenting on this years harvest, Nick says that generally rape yields were much better than expected. "Many crops have been over 4 t/ha and some 5 t/ha yields were reported. Successful crops were definitely linked to timely drilling, good seedbeds and establishment, combined with early and effective weed control."

He notes that oil content in rape has been high this harvest and this could add between £15-25/tonne bonus, improving gross margins and reducing cost of production/tonne.