



Flash to make a splash?

Flash tops the 2008 HGCA oilseed rape Recommended List with the highest treated gross output of any variety. CPM provides a round-up of views on the German-bred hybrid.

By Warren Landles

'Hybrids perform best with adensity of 45-55 established plants/m².'

The hybrid, Flash, may have recorded the highest treated yield (i.e. 106%) in HGCA RL trials but it's the variety's income potential which one merchant believes will enable it to deliver better margin-over-seed-costs, compared with conventional types.

United Oilseeds data confirms that Flash offers the highest margin-over-seed-cost of any RL variety at present — equivalent to £1,421/ha based on a crop value of £300/t and an oil bonus worth £81.85/ha (see table on p41).

That works out £12/ha higher than Catana (despite its high oil), and £41/ha and £63/ha higher than Canti CS and Temple respectively, according to the company.

Mike Mann of DSV claims the high yield and income potential of varieties like Flash, coupled with strong forward prices, is creating renewed enthusiasm for OSR on-farm.

'5t/ha+ yields'

"Modern hybrids are helping average yields push upwards of 5t/ha," he says. "GPS mapping data has recorded parts of fields growing Flash yielding as much as 8t/ha."

Hybrids are certainly helping to lessen the inherent variability of soils by pulling up the yields on the poorer parts of fields, he adds.

With the right level of management, rape growers can further maximise their seed and oil yields simply by switching to hybrids, claims Mike Mann. "We all know the cultural importance of OSR within a wheat-based rotation, but with such strong prices at present, the gross returns from a high yielding rape crop are now easily on a par with wheat."

DSV UK trials manager, John Sweatman, believes new hybrid varieties will continue to push rape yields pwards, with the hybrid area continuing to

increase year-on-year. "It's interesting to note that five out of the top six candidate varieties for recommendation next year are hybrids.

"There's been a period of yield stagnation for a number of years with hybrids, but with some of the new, more robust varieties coming onto the market, the options for growers are much better."

In trials, Flash has shown that — even on marginal ground — it's capable of outperforming conventional varieties on more favourable land, provided it's managed properly."

Optimum plant stand

Crucially, a seed rate adjustment is required to achieve the optimum plant stand, he stresses. "This will determine how the crop is managed and ensure that it combines well."

John Sweatman notes that hybrids perform best with a density of 45-55 established plants/m². "That will help create the right canopy structure but careful agronomy is needed subsequently to ensure lodging is minimised."

Faster, more reliable harvesting has become a key priority for many growers,

and historically, some have had some difficulty in managing tall crops, he continues. "But with the level of expertise and crop inputs now available, the lodging risk is much lower in general."

Flash scores well for stem strength anyway (i.e. rated 7), he notes. "Trials have shown that, even where crops have yielded 5t/ha, individual plants have remained upright. Moreover, it's worth remembering that HGCA data is derived from plots with no PGRs applied.

"In a commercial cropping situation, the height of most varieties is very similar anyway."

Where growers have rape crops with a range of different maturity dates, careful desiccation is essential to ensure they dry out evenly, advises John Sweatman. "Timing is very important so the oil content and quality aren't adversely affected.

"Don't be too impatient — desiccation of later-maturing varieties, like Flash, should only be attempted when the seed has reached less than 30% moisture." At least 90% of pods in the middle third of the main stem need to be reddish-brown in colour, he says. "Going in too early will severely affect the oil quality."



"With careful management, Flash grown on marginal ground will outperform conventional varieties grown on more favourable land," says John Sweatman.

Oilseed rape expert, Ian Munnery, points out that with rape prices for harvest already around £300/t — and with big oil bonuses readily achievable — margins "for the right varieties" are extremely healthy. ▶



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“Spending a few extra pounds on fungicide inputs will pay handsomely this season,” predicts Ian Munnery.

► “Gross output is what rape production is all about nowadays and growers who select one of the newer recommended varieties, such as Flash, will benefit from its extra genetic potential.

Firm prices

“With strong forward prices at present, we’re already seeing more focus on gross output and — despite current fertiliser prices — those opting for a high input/high output production strategy are likely to see the best returns this season.”

That’s a key consideration when selecting varieties from the Recommended List, he stresses. “The response to

fungicides is also important and growers need to be aware of what their main disease threat is likely to be — stem canker or light leaf spot.”

Disease incidence isn’t as clearly defined as it used to be, he continues. “We’ve definitely seen stem canker appearing further north in recent years, and light leaf spot has been spreading further south and west.”

Ian Munnery would like to see growers and agronomists selecting varieties in a more measured way. He suggests using the ‘RL Plus’ information on the HGCA’s website www.hgca.com as a good starting point.

Similar performance

“But don’t get too ‘hung up’ on the raw data alone — a lot of varieties perform quite similarly, and last years result’s were produced in conditions best described as ‘arduous’. Use all the information available and aim to assess new variety performance on a limited scale on your own farm in the first year, rather than relying solely on small plot trials.”

Ian Munnery highlights phoma resistance as an example of where growers can get it wrong. “Resistance to stem canker is important, but so too is the response to fungicides overall — and gross output is far more important.

“I don’t know of any rape grower who doesn’t use a decent fungicide programme, and at current prices, spending a few extra pounds on fungicide will pay handsomely.”

However, he stresses that high disease ratings don’t necessarily equate

to total protection from disease or a high gross output. “Even varieties with good disease resistance scores will be adversely affected during periods of high disease pressure.”

Not to be overlooked?

Moreover, agronomic characteristics like lodging resistance at flowering and stem stiffness at harvest need to be considered as well, he believes. “With good scores for lodging and stem stiffness, hybrids like Flash won’t create too many problems at harvest provided the canopy is managed correctly.”

The choice of seed treatment is often left to chance by growers, believes Ian Munnery. “Conditions this season have shown the importance of good establishment and ensuring that the seed comes into contact with moisture quickly is crucial to this.”

He notes that while different establishment systems, such as Autocast-and-Flatlift, have produced many first-rate crops, their use must always be adapted to the conditions at the time of sowing. “This season, lack of moisture was the key but next year it may be flea beetle, slugs — or even too much water!”

While OSR margins are good, they mustn’t be viewed in isolation, he concludes. “It’s important to remember the valuable contribution OSR makes to the rotation as whole, for example boosting wheat yields.

“But above all, give your OSR a bit more ‘TLC’ this year — if it’s paying over £300/t, it deserves it!”

The results from two Frontier Agriculture

Margin over seed cost

Variety	HGCA yield rating	Yield t/ha	% oil over 40	Value of oil/ha (£)	Value of crop/ha (£)	Total value of crop/ha (£) *b	Less cost of seed/ha (£) *c	Margin over seed cost/ha (£)
Flash	106	4.66	3.90	81.85	1399.20	1481.05	60	1421.05
Catana*	102	4.49	5.10	103.00	1346.40	1449.40	40	1409.40
Castille	104	4.58	2.80	57.66	1372.80	1430.46	40	1390.46
Canti*	103	4.53	3.00	61.18	1359.60	1420.78	40	1380.78
Expert	102	4.49	3.20	64.63	1346.40	1411.03	36	1375.03
Excalibur	103	4.53	3.20	65.26	1359.60	1424.86	60	1364.86
Temple*	99	4.36	4.70	92.13	1306.80	1398.93	40	1358.93

Source: United Oilseeds

*HGCA Northern Recommendations

*b assuming £300/t for harvest 2008

*c based on autumn 2007 seed prices

trials last year, comparing 34 oilseed rape varieties on contrasting soils, highlight the reliability of hybrids.

The trials were located on a sandy clay loam soil at Horningsea, N Cambs and on a free-draining, flinty clay loam at Haywold on the Yorkshire Wolds. All the plots received a full fungicide, herbicide and insecticide programme.

"The extreme weather in 2007 provided a real test for all varieties," says Frontier's national trials manager, Jim Carswell. "The more robust types rose to the fore as moisture was very scarce during the vital April growing period — particularly at Horningsea."

He reckons the results confirm the superior reliability of hybrids compared with conventional types — especially where the drilling date is later and where moisture is scarce, or where establishment conditions are poor.

"In the dry autumn last year, assessments revealed that the hybrids grew well during October — helping them achieve better ground cover by the end of the autumn." This could be valuable where weed competition occurs prior to the autumn herbicide being applied, he notes.

LLS problem

Light leaf spot was a particular problem in the trials last year — particularly at the Yorkshire site — where it was observed in mid-March, he notes. "Hybrids with good disease resistance, like Flash, fared better than some other varieties in the trial."

Jim Carswell comments that there were three hybrids in the top five for yield at the Cambridge site last season — despite hybrids traditionally performing better in the north. "They seemed more able to withstand the very dry April last year, which probably restricted nitrogen uptake and growth in many crops."

Flash ranked fifth out of the 34 varieties at Horningsea — yielding 3.61t/ha and producing an oil content of 44.1%, he says. "And at the other site, it yielded 5t+/ha — probably due to the more plentiful availability of soil moisture." In this case, the oil content was 45.7%, he adds.

"Our data relates well to the 2008 HGCA Recommended List where Flash recorded the highest treated yield. Our trials also confirm that it flowers later than other varieties, giving some protection against late frost.

"Being a slightly later maturing type

may widen its appeal for some growers — particularly on farms growing a sizeable OSR area, where a spread of maturity dates would enable a more managed approach to harvest.

"Similarly, hybrids like Flash are better suited to later drilling — again helping to spread the autumn workload. That was certainly the experience last season."

Jim Carswell offers some timely advice to growers looking to manage the size of hybrid crop canopy this spring.

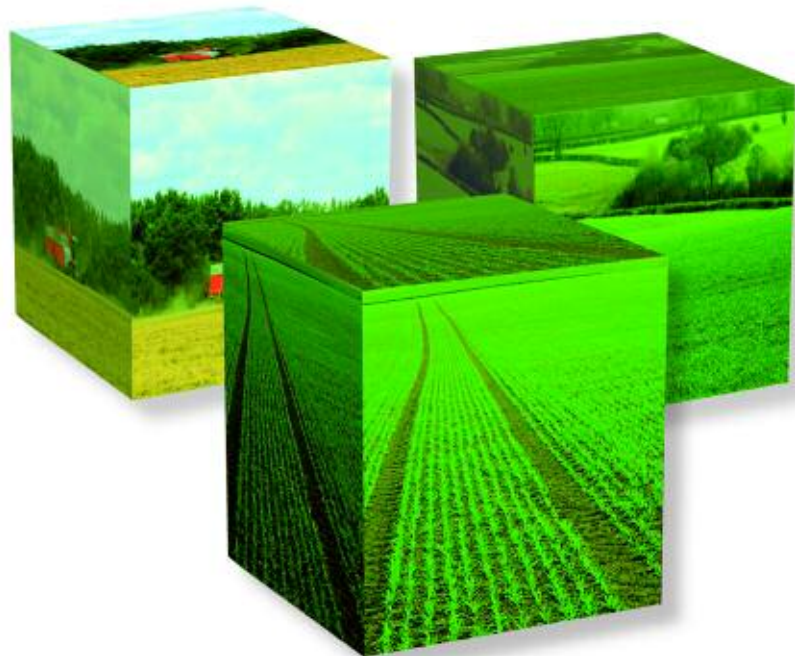
"Dense canopies can restrict light getting to the lower leaves and pods which drain the plant's resources. Where appropriate, I would advocate the use of a spring fungicide with a strong PGR effect applied during stem extension in March.

"Furthermore, by making regular

estimates of the Green Area Index to manage spring nitrogen application, it will help prevent over-thick canopies. Consider delaying a small proportion of the nitrogen top-dressing until the crop is just below the height of the spinning discs of a tractor-mounted spreader.

"Our findings over the past two seasons indicate that delaying the last 30kgN/ha until mid/late flowering helps reduce the crop height and the risk of lodging significantly in taller canopies." This approach also made it easier to swath varieties like Flash, he adds.

"The trials also highlight the importance of routine sulphur application in the spring — especially on sandy or chalky soils. Yields increased by 0.42t/ha in response to using a sulphur-containing compound." ■



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