

Profitable break crops for spring – risks and rewards

Finding a recipe for consistent spring break crop success can be a challenge on some farms. **Louise Impey** explores a number of options and looks at how growers should approach selecting the ones which give the best returns

Growers looking at spring break crop options should start by deciding whether they are going for a mainstream or a niche market.

With an expanding range of speciality crops joining the list of traditional choices, there is a place for all of them and no right or wrong selection, only the most appropriate for the individual farm situation, says Andrew Fairs of Essex-based niche crop specialist Fairking.

“The usual spring-sown suspects such as oilseed rape, linseed and pulses have a major advantage in that they can be grown with your existing machinery, using your previous knowledge and expertise,” he says.

In addition, they have several marketing outlets and come with an established agronomy package, which includes existing agrochemicals that can be used safely on them.

“With these crops, there’s no limit on yield, as they go into established markets. So, they’re a safe choice, but not always the most profitable. Price volatility can be an issue.”

Niche crops, such as borage and echium, have a limited market so must be grown on contract, with the price fixed before you drill.

“If these small markets are oversupplied, the price crashes. That’s not in anyone’s interest and in the worst-case scenario, it leaves you with a barn full of seed that no-one wants,” Mr Fairs adds.

Specialist equipment is often required for niche crops, much of which is expensive.

“There’s a sense of going it on your own with some of these speciality crops, from



Some millet seed loss is to be expected at harvest time

WHAT TO CONSIDER

Spring break crop choices

- 1. Mainstream v niche**
 - Is there a market?
- 2. Rotation or sequence**
 - Supply and demand
 - Price, area volatility
 - Weed burden
- 3. Hidden costs**
 - Processing of small quantities
 - Buying specialist equipment
 - Use of contractors
 - Impact on following crops
- 4. Customer**
 - Consumer vicinity
 - Practical knowledge
 - Agronomic advice
 - Credit rating

the lack of agrochemicals which can be used safely to meeting particular storage and drying requirements,” says Mr Fairs.

In addition, producing for a small market especially where there’s consumer demand means the crop must meet high standards.

“Ultimately, it’s the grower that makes work. They’re not an easy option or a quick fix, but the price you get reflects that.”

Whatever the choice, break crops should be looked at individually or in one year, believes Mr Fairs.

“The farm needs to be profitable, not just the crop. It may work to grow things in sequence, or have a double break, depending on the weed burden.”



Borage is drilled during late April



Soya crops have replaced pulses at Sittingbourne Monitor Farm

TIM SCRIVENER

NICHE CROPS

Current and future options

- **Borage** - drilled late April, harvested mid-September after swathing, seed drop an issue as matures indeterminately, market satisfied by 45 growers
- **Echium** - like borage but without seed drop, must be swathed, beware sclerotinia
- **Quinoa** - drilled in March, harvested late September, grown on wide rows, not processed before sale
- **Camelina** - spring sown, very small seeds, no specialist harvest equipment required
- **Chia** - early stages for crop, harvested late September, no agrochemicals available
- **Naked barley** - easy to grow, good against black-grass, potential market in bakery
- **Naked spelt** - early days, interest from millers for use in artisan loaves
- **Evening primrose** - takes two years to mature (or drill in autumn)

“These crops are not an easy option but the price you get reflects that”

**Andrew Fairs,
Fairking**

Case Study – Soya at Sittingbourne AHDB Monitor Farm, Kent

Disappointing performance and harvesting difficulties with pulse crops prompted Kent farm manager Mark Bowsher-Gibbs of the Sittingbourne Monitor Farm to try 18ha of soya in 2017, as a possible replacement for peas.

Following a cover crop of feed oats, which had been grazed off over the winter and then sprayed with glyphosate, the soya was drilled in early May at a seed rate of 140kg/ha, using inoculated seed at a cost of about £140/ha.

“The aim is to get 50-65 plants/sq m. The plant has a fixed hypocotyl length, so it mustn't be drilled deeper than 2.5-3.5cm. As a result, it is important to conserve moisture at drilling,” he says.

Seed-bed fertiliser included 30kg/ha of nitrogen, as well as maintenance dressings of P and K, plus some sulphur – something which wouldn't have to be done every year.

A pre-emergence herbicide mix of Nirvana (imazamox + pendimethalin) and Gamit (clomazone) was applied, followed by a split application of post-emergence herbicide Pinnacle (thifensulfuron-methyl) – allowing magnesium and manganese to be applied >



Mark Bowsher-Gibbs
in a soya field

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