



OILSEED RAPE IN DRY AREAS: A GOOD START MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

Oilseed rape is an attractive market crop – even under dry conditions. However, in arid regions in particular, consistent crop management determines success or failure. From crop rotation and crop establishment to soil preparation and sowing: the following article highlights the biggest challenges and outlines the measures that can help ensure a successful oilseed rape crop even when water is scarce.

Starting conditions are crucial

Oilseed rape is a key part of crop rotation on many farms. Particularly on poorer sites, winter wheat or winter barley are often scarcely economical to grow without oilseed rape as a preceding crop. At the same time, tight oilseed rape cereal crop rotations lead to increasing pressure from insect pests, diseases and problematic weeds, and consequently to greater yield fluctuations.

Expanding the oilseed rape rotation is worthwhile. While alternatives such as maize, sugar beet, grain legumes, sunflowers or spring cereals each have their own weaknesses, they can help to reduce crop-related problems

and limit the overall increase in the effort required to grow oilseed rape, at least in the medium term.

» **Soil preparation and sowing play a key role, particularly in arid regions. «**

Dr. Stephan Deike

Oilseed rape is a crop that requires a great deal of attention, particularly under drought stress. Carrying out soil preparation, fertilisation and crop protection to a high standard and on schedule is crucial

for success. On many farms, oilseed rape therefore takes priority over other crops. This can lead to peaks in workload, but these are usually staggered over time and can therefore be managed effectively.

In dry areas in particular, soil preparation and sowing play key roles. The aim is to conserve the available moisture as effectively as possible and to give oilseed rape a quick start. If moisture is still present in the seed zone during prolonged dry spells, slightly earlier sowing dates (3 to 5 days) may be advisable. It is essential to keep the time between soil preparation and sowing as short as possible.



Fig. 1: Here, oilseed rape sown into dry soil (left) is shown in comparison to oilseed rape sown 14 days later following rainfall (right). The photographs were taken on the same day.

Proven principles for dry conditions:

- Carry out tillage and sowing on cool days where possible, and in the morning or evening.
- If the topsoil is completely dry, germination is reduced – temporary dormancy may occur.
- Ploughing is often counterproductive in extremely dry conditions: increased heating, faster drying and often higher activity of the cabbage stem flea beetle (CSFB).

If seedbed quality is inadequate, an additional tillage pass with targeted reconsolidation may be advisable, provided this results in more fine soil. Rolling after sowing is often of little benefit on coarse or very dry seedbeds. It is better to reconsolidate after primary tillage, as this improves the seeding accuracy of the seed drill.

On clay soils, good seedbed quality is often difficult to achieve. On stable soils without harmful compaction, healthy oilseed rape stands can sometimes be established using direct drilling with suitable technology.

The early growth stage is decisive

The biggest challenge in oilseed rape cultivation in arid regions is ensuring the crop establishes itself successfully. Many of these regions are also hotspots for the

cabbage stem flea beetle (CSFB). Delayed emergence or poor youth development combined with a severe (CSFB) infestation often leads to massive damage.

Tips for crop establishment despite CSFB:

- By sowing slightly earlier, the available residual moisture can sometimes be utilised more effectively, thereby avoiding CSFB infestation during the early growth stage.
- Nevertheless, measures to prevent the flea beetle from laying eggs should still be taken consistently. Therefore, in the event of persistent severe infestation – despite high costs – the use of systemic insecticides may be advisable, even in crops that appear to be well-developed.

In addition, deficiencies in pH levels or in the supply of essential nutrients can hinder the early development of oilseed rape and should be specifically addressed.

Vigorous crops in dry regions require a delicate touch as they continue to develop. Growth regulators should be used very selectively, particularly on poorer sites and in the spring. In terms of yield, early sowings that tend to grow too vigorously are often no better than those sown at normal or even later times.

Remain flexible – even with oilseed rape

If there is no rainfall, patience is required. If necessary, sowing should be shifted to other fields with better residual moisture, for example due to the previous crop or localised rainfall events.

In many regions, oilseed rape can now be sown until the middle or end of the first ten days of September. If there is no rain by then, alternative crops must be considered. Experience shows that under extremely poor starting conditions, low yields combined with high input costs are to be expected.

Conclusion

Oilseed rape in arid regions is not a sure-fire success. Crucial factors include a secure start, soil management consistently focused on moisture retention, and a willingness to respond flexibly to weather and site conditions. Those who take these points to heart increase their chances of managing the crop successfully from an economic perspective.

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