

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UK's growing cereals and oilseeds are more varied in their stage of development than usual for the time of year.

In April, there was less rainfall than in preceding months in most regions, giving hope to some growers of longer drier spells. But the intermittent showers still prevented some saturated soils from drying sufficiently, offering some regions with 'false starts' to the spring fieldwork. While winter crop conditions in these areas are better than in late March, they continue to struggle.

In other regions, which either received less rainfall or have better draining soils, spring fieldwork has been progressing well and crop conditions have improved noticeably since last month.

The information in this report was captured up to Tuesday 30 April 2024 for AHDB by The Andersons Centre. Differences between crops are explored below.

CROP CONDITION AND GROWTH STAGES

Crop Condition ratings have been undertaken using the USDA methodology. The national (GB) scores are provided here, with regional ratings on the [AHDB website](#).

Crop condition definitions:

- Very poor:** Extreme degree of loss to yield potential, complete or near crop failure.
- Poor:** Heavy degree of loss to yield potential, which can be caused by excess soil moisture, drought, disease etc.
- Fair:** Less than normal crop condition. Yield loss is a possibility, but the extent is unknown.
- Good:** Yield prospects are normal. Moisture levels are adequate and disease, insect damage and weed pressure are minor.
- Excellent:** Yield prospects are above normal. Crops are experiencing little or no stress. Disease, insect damage and weed pressures are insignificant.

GB crop condition ratings

	Very Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Crops not yet planted or emerged
Winter Wheat	5%	18%	32%	32%	13%	0%
Winter Barley	6%	15%	24%	40%	16%	0%
Winter Oats	9%	14%	25%	39%	14%	0%
Winter OSR	10%	16%	28%	34%	13%	0%
Spring Wheat	0%	1%	6%	4%	0%	89%
Spring Barley	1%	6%	31%	12%	1%	48%
Spring Oats	0%	0%	3%	3%	0%	94%
Spring OSR	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	99%

Source: The Andersons Centre

Note: Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding

WHEAT

Overall

Nationally, the wheat crop is in one of its poorest states in recent years at this time of year.

Winter wheat has suffered from an unsatisfactory crop establishment and overwintered in very wet soil conditions. These have led to root damage and some plant rot. Many fields are very gappy, whilst others were either never drilled or have been written off. The worst crops are in the Midland areas stretching from Gloucestershire to Lincolnshire and parts of East Anglia and Yorkshire.

In other parts of the UK, particularly the south of England north of England and Scotland winter wheat crops are in better condition. Crops on free draining chalks and sandy soils are reasonable to good. Wheat development in the UK is now in two groups; that on lighter land where fieldwork has been possible, and the heavier, colder soils where the crops are now considerably behind where they should be. These heavier soils remain waterlogged or only recently machinery has been able to travel on them.

Overall, yield in 2024 is likely to be noticeably lower than usual. Nationally, 45% of winter wheat is rated as in a good or excellent condition. This is up from the end of March (34%) but still significantly below last April's 88%.

Crop establishment

This heading is seldom necessary in late April, but wheat drilling has continued later than usual. Some very late drilling of usually winter varieties, as well as spring wheat crops, has taken place in April and these crops are now emerging. [Planting winter wheat varieties this late is very high risk](#) as without enough cold weather, crops won't be able to progress beyond tillering this year.

There is considerable in-field variation for both winter and spring crop development. Compaction and water logging are clearly evident. Some crops are quite forward, where others struggle following waterlogging and cold weather. This month, a few further fields have been written off and replaced with a spring crop where possible, or possibly a Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) option.

Crops in Northern England and Scotland, whilst behind their usual stage of growth by now, are generally looking well. The longer day length will help them catch up now. Similarly, reports from the South of England highlight late drilling but crops now looking reasonable to good in many cases. Drilling is completed in the South.

Nutrition

Nitrogen has been applied to almost all winter wheat. Most winter wheat, especially on the freer draining soils, has had its second application. The crop has responded well with a deepening of colour, and spurt in leaf growth. This is also useful for helping to dry the soils, as much as build bulk in the plant. But the plants badly need sunshine and warmth to dry them out and get them growing well.

Fertiliser at this time of year, especially this year, is primarily about building plant strength and tillers if possible. This will raise the headcount from a low plant level. Most crops received foliar nutrition applications at T0, even if fungicides were not applied. This, combined with plant growth regulators, has made a huge difference to some crops. The micronutrients have visibly improved the health of many crops and aided tillering. It will be time to think about the final dose of nitrogen applications on better crops in early May. Some forward crops on drier land have already received this.

Pest, weed and disease pressures

Some growers reported that one day in ten was suitable for spraying in April and access remained a problem. Inevitably, fieldwork is way behind where it should be. Some growers missed their first (T0) fungicide application. For others, the T1 fungicide applications are being applied, or soon will be, where crops are sufficiently developed and leaf 3 is fully emerged. Some have combined the two applications together.

Some growers have been using smaller, lighter tractors with wide wheels to gain access. This has allowed progress but was inevitably slower for some than would be necessary to cover enough land quickly enough.

Septoria is abundant on lower leaves in the wetter areas, particularly in the light of the spray problems already incurred earlier in the season. It is excessive in some regions, such as Northern and Western England. The weather from now on will dictate the level of attack the crop is exposed to.

Eyespot is an issue in the Midlands and, for some varieties, if combined with poor rooting, could cause lodging in the better crops.

Yellow and brown rusts have also been seen in parts. Yellow rust is prevalent particularly in the Midlands and East on varieties like Skyfall, and surprisingly is also evident on resistant varieties like Extase. On other varieties, it will be a continuation of protective measures. Yellow rust has also been spread easily with windy conditions.

Some fields have only recently received their first grassweed herbicide. This may delay the next fungicide and plant growth regulator application as a separation is required. In some cases, those herbicide choices can act as a growth regulator because of the impact on the crop. So, growers are being cautious in these situations given the cold nights and continued frosts in places.

There were many fields that did not receive their autumn herbicide application and now need cleaning up. Efficacy will be poor as weeds are larger now than in autumn, and the headache of the fieldwork backlog means timing may not be ideal. Not all necessary applications can be mixed. Some soils still haven't warmed enough for spraying emerging

blackgrass either; there could be some 'messy' crops in late June. Gappy crops will make this worse, allowing ryegrass and blackgrass to tiller and grow.

Prospects

Some areas of the UK, particularly regions in the south, west, north of England and Scotland, have some good-looking crops of wheat, with plants growing well, albeit still behind in some of these regions. It is largely down to soil type and drilling date. Those crops on free draining land have fared well; those drilled before the end of the first week of October look better too. Crops in Northern Ireland and Wales are also behind but catching up. In other parts of the UK and the Midlands, the crops are generally poor.

Much of the UK winter wheat crop is not strong and could be easily damaged by either continued poor weather or disease in the coming months to harvest. With reduced root structure, much of the winter wheat would not cope with either. It continues to be stressed with cold, wet conditions and de-waxing of leaves at times; and even when it does warm, there are huge variations in temperatures day to day.

Less than fifteen percent of the spring wheat crop is visibly above the soil as yet. It was late drilled throughout the UK, but what has emerged is looking surprisingly well.

WINTER BARLEY

Overall

Winter barley is, for some regions, the strongest crop, especially the earlier drilled crops, which established before excessive rain fell on it. First flag leaves are visible, and a few awns are popping out in places. Winter barley which received sufficient nutrition is playing catch-up well from the wet winter months. It has turned a darker shade of green from the sickly looking yellowy green last month. Some suggest they are almost too leafy.

Later drilled winter barley is not as healthy. Those crops on heavy land or where waterlogged may not catch up now and in some cases, there are areas in fields which have died, particularly in the Midlands.

In total 56% of winter barley is rated as in a good or excellent condition, a notable improvement from the 38% in late-March. However, this is still well below the 90% rated good to excellent at this point a year ago.

Nutrition

The increasing day length and warmer temperatures are facilitating rapid growth through the relevant stages. Crops received plant growth regulators (PGRs) at T0 or T1 where possible (or together) but some may not have been applied. PGRs will still be needed to prevent lodging in better crops.

Like wheat, applications of trace elements and micronutrients have helped struggling plants to green up, but many crops have lost tillers and will not yield well as a result. Late manganese applications, similar to wheat, due to the weather will have caused some issues and potentially lost plants on prone soils.

Pest, weed and disease pressures

Many barley crops will miss one of their fungicides this season; usually T1 and T2 sprays adequately protect most crops. T1 applications have been applied and T2 is now approaching or already here. With so few spraying days, key growth stages have been

missed and plants are approaching the next key stage in some cases before the previous application has been applied.

Rhynchosporium is evident in many crops and some net blotch.

Prospects

Prospects for the winter barley crop are generally a tale of two halves. The good free draining land and/or where crops were drilled in September and established well, offer good yield potential. These crops look well, are forward, reasonably clean and now have the flag leaf emerging.

But those on heavier soils, particularly the areas worst affected by the rainfall events in say the Midlands and North, are not so good. These crops are really variable and at all growth stages; some areas died or struggled in the wet. Even where they have picked up, these winter barley crops have lost tillers. As a result, whilst from the road they look visibly better, when you get in those crops, they are relatively thin and focused on the main tiller which has bolted. This will inevitably mean much lower yield prospects.

OATS

Crop establishment

In total 53% of the winter oat crop is rated as good or excellent, up from 37% in late-March. Oats are a resilient crop and the winter crops, provided they established well, have stood the test of the wet conditions reasonably well. That said, they are not in as good a condition as we would like for this time of year e.g. last year 81% was rated good or excellent. They are exceptionally varied with the usual variance in height and colour across the field that oats often show, but even more so this year.

Spring crops will, in the main, have all been planted by now with a few isolated fields left to establish. Conditions have not been good to establish any spring crop with some very indifferent seed beds. These were either wet at drilling, or certain areas in fields had to be left un-cropped where standing water remained. However, with moisture during sowing and heavy rain after sowing for some, they will stand a good chance of getting away swiftly when temperatures improve. At present, cold soils and cold nights are steady crop establishment with planted crops taking 12-14 days to emerge in most cases. In warm years, this can take only 5-7 days.

Nutrition

Winter oats do not need early nitrogen as a rule. Most winter crops have now received one dose and a sulphur fertiliser. Many have also received some foliar nutrition of manganese, zinc and other trace elements, which will have aided plant health.

Pest, weed and disease pressures

Broad-leaved weed (BLW) control should have been applied and the crop is now growing well, picking up that early nutrition. Grass weeds are not controllable in winter oats and as such, there will always be grass weed issues where oats are grown on less-than-ideal fields for grass weed pressure. Most broad-leaved weeds are easily controlled. Groundsel and docks often feature in oat fields where no pre-emergent herbicides are applied, but now most are curling up with spring herbicide applications.

There is no major pest issue at this time of the year and no major issues reported of barley yellow dwarf virus (BYDV). Disease-wise, there is some crown rust as expected but nothing significant. A fungicide will be applied soon, along with PGR and more foliar nutrition.

Prospects

Overall prospects for winter oats are similar to wheat and barley. The good crops should stand a fair chance of yielding reasonably well but patchy and poorer crops will struggle, with rooting and manganese being the main issues for some crops. Some winter crops have been patched up with spring oats in place / headlands etc.

What little spring oats have emerged are doing well, but the majority is yet to get going.

OILSEED RAPE

Crop establishment

As winter oilseed rape (OSR) in the majority of the UK comes into flower, the patchy fields, and the uneven crops become clearer than ever. The crop usually looks better when it flowers, but this year, in the West Midlands, the gaps have become more apparent and have not filled in.

The wet weather has led to major root rot issues and in places we have had reports of crops lodging even where the crop is thin, simply because the roots have virtually disappeared. These poorer crops have been slow to develop secondary branches.

Overall, only 47% of the winter oilseed rape crop is rated as in good or excellent condition. This represents an improvement from late March (31%) but is still well below the 66% with the same rating at the end of April 2023.

Nutrition

Poor weather at the start of the flowering period is likely to reduce the flowering period and, being cold, pollinators may have been less active which may also reduce potential yields. This means the range of first flowering dates is wide, even though each flower might not remain for long. Between fields, this provides opportunities to time fieldwork. But within fields, it means challenges regarding application timings and may, if the late flowering plants don't catch up, leave ununiformed seed at harvest, with red seed and lower oilseed content.

Pest, weed and disease pressures

For those crops that have got this far, the flowering sprays (for sclerotinia), are being applied. Access has been an issue for some field parcels.

For others, cabbage stem flea beetle (CSFB) larvae are feeding on weak plants and inputs are being minimised in an attempt to generate a margin from these poorer crops. Mealy Aphid is at low levels but needs to be watched.

The thin and gappy crops have maintained access for pigeons to continue feasting from them. Usually by now, pigeons are barely able to land in the fields, but this year is different.

The West and North, which historically have been less affected by CSFB are now as affected as the East in some cases.

Prospects

We should not expect any records to be broken this year for winter OSR. It is too early to comment on spring OSR.

SPRING BARLEY

Crop establishment

Longer periods of dry weather between the showers in April has allowed most growers to drill their spring barley seed. Most will have wanted to have finished by the end of April, but there are still empty fields waiting to see the drill. This year, the range of drilling dates will be large. It is common for spring drilling to be a month late this year. This is the case from the South coast of England to Aberdeenshire.

However, reports suggest well drilled late barley is looking far better than barley drilled early in poor soil conditions or where it then had further heavy rain post drilling. A few parts of the Eastern coast though, do have some excellent looking January drilled spring barley. Early drilled spring barley is well established now, having passed its 3-leaf stage.

In early March, a large rise in the area of spring barley was intended ([Early Bird Survey, March re-run](#)). But the continued wet weather through March and early April will have reduced planting expectations. The clock is now ticking, with only a few days left to drill spring barley in most of the UK.

Some people are now planting spring cereals (primarily barley) mainly with the straw in mind, which is currently a valuable part of the crop. Straw prices are high. Barley in Wales and Northern Ireland has been heavily affected by excessive rain and drilling has been set back, but many growers in these parts are more accustomed to higher levels of rainfall.

Nutrition

The early drilled spring barley is ready for, or has recently had, its first nitrogen applications depending on conditions and fieldwork backlog. For most crops recently drilled, at least half of the nitrogen fertiliser will have gone in the seed beds either placed with the drill or spread in front of the drill. Normally this is important to ensure the plant can access it quickly due to the lack of moisture in many springs but clearly this isn't an issue this year.

Pest, weed and disease pressures

Some growers have opted to minimise the number of passes this spring to protect their soils, save time to catch up with the fieldwork and also reduce the costs on what they consider will not be stellar yields. Some spring barley crops have therefore missed their pre-emergence herbicides. For many, unless grass weed pressure is high, the effectiveness of pre-emergent herbicides on grass weeds in spring due to forced lower rates make it a borderline decision. Those growers will focus on broadleaf weed control post crop emergence. Rain after these applications can also hamper the emerging crop in less-than-ideal conditions so some have decided to give the pre-emergent application a miss.

Prospects

Many growers have now been able to drill spring barley, suggesting the overall area of spring barley could be quite high. But the average yield is unlikely to break any records because much of it has been planted late. Some growers might also be growing it for the first time in some years and be less familiar with the crop.

OTHER POINTS

Some fields have been damaged in the drilling process and growers are uneasy about this. These fields will require remedial works in areas or certain fields in the autumn when conditions are much drier. Trying to work land at depth when wet risks causing damage unless being ploughed. It has been a difficult balance for growers to strike and some field conditions proved more variable or less suitable than field walking suggested.

Some growers are reporting they are likely to use SFI options to ensure crop cover rather than a crop.