

Canola in Western NSW

Grower Experience:

Stuart McDonald
Mumble Creek
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Overview:

Stuart McDonald has shared with us three years experience of growing canola on the western fringe of the NSW wheat belt, at Mumble Creek, north west of Condobolin. Stuart regards canola as a highly suitable crop for this area, including being more suitable to the short growing season than wheat and tolerating frosts better than wheat. He has observed significant benefits of growing canola including profitability in it's own right, huge yield increases in following wheat crops and spreading of workload for sowing and harvest. Stuart emphasises the importance of timely sowing and notes the suitability of canola seed for dry sowing, he also comments on the costs of windrowing.

Canola's Suitability for the Western Wheatbelt

Canola is rapidly establishing itself as a viable crop in many areas of the NSW wheat belt. Although it is still considered by many to be unsuitable for the western fringe. The first concern most people claim when they think of canola being grown further west, is that the rainfall will be inadequate. Whilst there is evidence that the rainfall does decrease as you move west, this is only part of the story. Just as important is the fact that the growing season shortens considerably as you move west. It is this shorter growing season as much as rainfall which contributes to lower crop yields. Long season crops like wheat don't have time to finish before it gets hot and windy in the spring. The advantage that canola has is that it has a much shorter growing season than wheat. As a result, if it is sown on time it tends to have done the hard work before the harsh spring arrives. Whereas wheat is still flowering and trying to fill grain. This is why canola yields, as a proportion of wheat yields, will increase as you move west.

Canola in a Rotation

It has been our experience that the benefits of canola for following crops are just as pronounced here as they are anywhere else in NSW. Expected yield increases in wheat following canola are in the order of thirty percent (30%) better than wheat following wheat. So if graingrowers in the east of the wheat belt value canola as a viable crop in their rotation, it makes sense that it would also have a place further west.

Canola involves more monitoring and more expense than wheat, which deters many potential growers, but I feel the extra work is justified considering the increased productivity that results. I would encourage anyone considering planting canola to go ahead with it. It need not be a huge area. The important thing is that growers know first hand what to expect, to familiarise themselves with the agronomy of the crop, so that they will have the knowledge and confidence to grow the crop on a large scale when opportunities arise.

Experience at Mumble Creek

Over the last three years, (1997 - 1999), the canola on Mumble Creek has averaged about half a tonne per acre = 1.25 tonnes/ha, and 42% oil, giving it a level of profitability comparable to wheat. But over the course of the rotation it puts us a long way in front. And if oil prices were to lift from present levels at a greater rate than wheat, the time may well come again, where canola will be a much more profitable crop than wheat, in its own right.

Over the three years of canola we have increased our area from 300 acres in 1997 up to 2100 in 1999. We expect to sow about 2500 to 3000 acres this year (2000). Most will be sown dry beginning in very late March so that any reasonable rain in April or May will get it up and away. As well as giving the canola the best possible chance, this enables more timely planting of wheat when the rain does come.

We have had no trouble with aphids yet but we do put insecticide in the mix when spraying for broadleaf weeds, post emergence. (Lontrel & Lemat). In 1997 we had to spray for heliothis.

1997 was the first year. It was sown in late May (too late), and the variety was Dunkeld. It wasn't a good combination. Dunkeld is a long season variety, but it was all we could source at the time. It turned out to be a very dry year. There were no prizes for wheat or canola that year but we were none the less very impressed with the effort. 0.25t/acre at 39% oil. The crop was direct headed with good results. In 1998 the variety was Monty and it was sown in mid April. It was a good year and again we direct headed with good results. 0.75t/acre at 44% oil.

In 1999 we grew Monty, Mystic and Rainbow. It was sown from mid to late April and was

another good year. However germination was poor. The soil was too dry when the last was sown and the next rain was not until June. This meant that the yields ranged from about 1t/acre to 0. It/acre with an average of 0.45/acre at 38.5% oil. Some was direct headed with good results and some was windrowed. Losses were higher in the windrowed canola.

I am not a big fan of windrowing. Regardless of when you windrow you will get lower oil and a lower yield than direct heading. And you pay for the cost of the actual operation as well. The risk you take is shattering if you leave the crop standing. The windrowing decision is not an easy one. Many growers who used to windrow now direct head. Many who used to direct head now windrow. Many do a bit of both.

Benefits of Canola

I firmly believe that canola is here to stay in the district. It is in many ways better suited to the environment than wheat. The frost risk from sowing early is much greater with wheat because it only flowers for a few days. Frosts at this time can devastate wheat crops. Canola flowers for weeks so a few heavy frosts have very little effect. Much less effect than a harsh September-October, if you sow too late. The earlier you sow the longer canola flowers, therefore the higher the yield. Canola is better suited to dry sowing than wheat. The seed although smaller is much tougher, and in soils with good structure emergence is no problem. The seed will wait dormant for months in the soil and then when it rains, up it comes. The important thing is getting it away as early as possible. The benefit to following cereal crops is amazing. It also spreads your workload at both sowing and harvest. It is really is a fantastic crop, and nothing to be afraid of.