

Uncertain times but real market for spring malting barley

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Uncertainties such as Brexit may be unsettling, but producing the right type of spring malting barley still offers a real market opportunity, growers attending a recent Syngenta malting barley conference in East Anglia heard.

Growing spring malting barley for brewing and distilling continues to offer opportunities, but it's ever more crucial to produce the correct grain nitrogen content and grow the varieties local buyers want.

That was a key message from industry experts to Eastern Counties growers attending an inaugural East Anglian malting barley conference organised by Syngenta in Newmarket recently, ahead of the 2018 growing season.

Beginning with a global overview, Frontier Agriculture barley trader, Westly Garner, said 61% of the world's malting barley is grown in Europe - with the UK the second biggest producer in Europe, ahead of Germany and behind France.

But while European malting barley was primarily used in brewing, the UK also has its distilling market

to grow for, he said.

“Whatever Brexit throws at us, understand what your local market wants,” urged Mr Garner, “because access to it will be more important than ever.

“Reasons to grow spring malting barley in 2018 include black-grass management, as well as rotational reasons and for its gross margin. I think it’s an attractive crop.”

Pointing to the grain nitrogen contents typically required for spring malting barley, of a maximum of 1.85% for brewing and a maximum of 1.65% for distilling, Mr Garner suggested where farms can continuously achieve low grain nitrogen barley, they should strongly consider a variety suited to distilling, because it can provide good returns.

“The market needs to lead your variety choice,” he stressed. “On the brewing side, Propino will remain the mainstay. But I think Laureate is going to take about 40% of the distilling market.

“You don’t want to be growing a variety the market doesn’t want. Already seed supply is starting to get tight.”

Bob King of Crisp Malting Group, which runs maltings in East Anglia as well as Scotland, and in Germany and Poland, said of the total 1.9 million tonnes of barley converted into malt in the UK annually, 1.6 million tonnes of this comes from spring barley.

Additionally, just under half of the UK malting barley purchased goes into distilling, he said, which equates to all the malting barley that meets specification grown in Scotland, and a significant proportion of that grown in England.

Moreover, although global consumption of alcoholic drinks had declined since 2010, whisky consumption was picking up again after a lull, he highlighted, and the brewing of craft beers, which use a higher inclusion rate of malted barley than conventional beer, was also increasing both in the UK and overseas. And whisky and beer are high on the list of top UK food and drink exports, he pointed out.

“The UK continues to follow the craft beer trend,” explained Mr King. “It’s a small proportion of the market, but it can use twice as much malt to produce the same volume of a non-craft beer.

“Also, the amount of malt that goes into distilling has grown since the year 2000. Single malt whisky has grown very favourably. Exports in 2016 were above those in 2015 after two years of falls.”

For growers in the Eastern counties, Mr King said just over a third of the malting capacity in the UK is in East Anglia and South Lincolnshire. “We know there’s not enough barley produced in this area to meet demand.”

As for varieties, interim figures for England showed nearly half the spring malting barley purchased in 2017 was Propino, making it the biggest variety, but Laureate, which last year was promoted to full approval for both malt distilling and brewing uses on the Malting Barley Committee list, was now also starting to appear in the figures, he added.

“From my point of view, Laureate has full approval for distilling, so we as a business have moved very much to Laureate. There’s a big demand for low grain nitrogen barley of less than 1.65%,” he confirmed.

Pointing to malting barley trials carried out by Syngenta at its Innovation Centres, James Southgate of Syngenta said the last two seasons had illustrated clearly how rainfall patterns can have a major impact on achieving grain nitrogen specifications, by influencing the uptake of nitrogen fertiliser.

“The total nitrogen fertiliser applied should be in line with the contract,” said Mr Southgate, “but may also need tailoring to the variety. Laureate, for example, tends to produce inherently lower grain nitrogen than Propino in our trials.

“For Laureate grown for brewing, we were getting yield responses up to doses of 150 kg/ha of nitrogen fertiliser without affecting grain nitrogen too much, so 150 kg/ha seemed the top limit. But for Laureate for distilling, anything above 120 kg/ha in 2017 was pushing grain nitrogen over 1.65%.”

Photo: Laureate grain with glasses; Propino

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