



Farm business built on flower power

Petals are as important as potatoes for one Shropshire arable farm's income. But unlike root buyers, there's hope petal purchasers won't need to come back for more. **Simon Wragg** reports

In a throw-away society it's the younger consumer generation that often takes the flack. But not at JM Bubb & Son of Lynn South Farm, near Newport, Shropshire, where the older generation is responsible for the initial success of a very special throw-away product - 100% natural petal confetti.

Today, the family-run arable business is led by brothers Jonathan and Jim Bubb. Jonathan looks after the 588ha (1450ac) of arable cropping - 162ha (400ac) of winter wheat for animal feed, 90ha (223ac) of oilseed rape for processing, and 150ha (370ac) of potatoes for manufacturer McCain - while

Jim grows mixed colour delphiniums and other flowers to be processed on-farm into natural petal confetti.

Their grandmother, Marian, led the family farm into growing flowers, explains Jim. "She began selling flowers grown in the garden and dried over an Aga through the local Women's Institute market. She did well, so dad (Michael) put an acre down

to flowers and it's grown from there.

"Today flowers are equally as important to farm income as potatoes. The only difference is we strive to ensure our potato buyer keeps coming back whereas with confetti there's almost no repeat trade as we hope customers only marry once," he adds wryly.

While several flower crops are cultivated annually - delphinium, corn flower and wheat - the family also grows up to 30 test varieties to seek out new colours. "It's a very fashion-orientated business as wedding trends change. We have to anticipate what future trends will be and grow for that market," adds Jim.

The aim is to hold two season's supply in store against the risk of a poor year for flowering. Up to 25 extra pairs of hands are drafted in over summer to harvest petals. These are dried on-farm before being put into store.

"Fashion can be a vexed issue. The '90s saw huge demand for dried flowers thanks to the likes of nationwide interior retailer Laura Ashley. In 2000 fashion moved on and sales plummeted. Only sales of wheat and delphiniums held up," he explains.

"The delphiniums were being bought to turn into confetti so in 2005 we formed Shropshire Pet-



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als and put our effort behind that market. It's been a steep learning curve in a completely different market to agricultural produce. An arable farm will sell all it grows at a price in a given year but with dried flowers you stand the risk of not being able to sell at any price if the market's moved on."

The need to focus on marketing, promotion and embrace social media has helped hone the brothers' skills beyond being businessmen of the farmyard.

"Seventy five per cent of sales are done on-line. There's huge potential for growth as we currently account for three per cent of UK weddings," he explains.

Having a non-food business to help support overall income when agricultural commodity prices are weak has paid dividend, adds Jonathan. "As with Shropshire Petals our focus for the arable enterprise is to take care of our land, our customers and our landlords."

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>> “We grow and store main crop potatoes on contract through GVAP for McCain. There’s been huge investment in bulk storage here at Lynn South Farm over the past two years to enable us to deliver crop to the customer in May.

“We aim to keep the arable land in good heart and insist on the longest rotation possible on our own and rented ground to try and keep on top of wireworm and potato cyst nematode burden. With a decreasing chemical armoury - including post harvest use of CIPC within the bulk store - that will become more important,” suggests Jonathan.

Inputs are purchased through AtlasFram to which the business is a member and also markets some cereals. However, feed wheat is largely marketed by the family as the farm is close to the densely stocked Welsh borders.

Oilseed Rape – which replaced sugar beet when the local plant was decommissioned – is also marketed locally. “As a crop rape has helped improve soil structure. With beet we saw a lot of field traffic during harvest from September to December adding to compaction.”

JM Bubb & Son is keen to expand



Above: Jim looks after the flower enterprise, while Jonathan is responsible for arable cropping

acreage if the right opportunity arose. “There is a competitive market in the West Midlands for potato ground. But we feel we have the right attitude regarding rotation to offer landlords a good proposition.

“We won’t take on extra acres at any price – the economies are dictated by investment into machinery and crop inputs – be we would like to expand. We’d include in that an opportunity to put down extra acres for Shropshire Petals. It offers a huge opportunity for growth despite most customers only calling once.”

JM Bubb & Son

- Arable and dried flower crops valued equally
 - Focus on rotation for root crop disease control
 - Investment in ventilated/ insulated potato store
 - AtlasFram members / market roots via GVAP
 - ELS and HLS agreements in place
 - Embrace social media for Shropshire Petals
- www.shropshirepetals.co.uk



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