

# WHEAT VARIETY BLENDS



Single varieties of wheat grown on large areas provide the maximum opportunity for the selection of pathogens and pests that can adapt to the variety being grown. Even where multiple varieties are grown across a farm they may carry the same resistance genes, so appear identical to the pest or pathogen. To avoid, or reduce, these problems we need to introduce and manage diversity in better ways; one of these ways is by using a variety blend.

In the 1980s, the practice of growing blends of cereal varieties was common throughout the UK. This practice faded away, but now many farmers are re-exploring cereal blends to tackle pest, disease and weed threats and reduce inputs.

A variety blend acts as a portfolio diversifier and an insurance policy. It may not necessarily be the top yielder on-farm, but it can provide stability by buffering against environmental stress and variation. While growers might not see an economic advantage in every season, they should across seasons.

Research has shown that the use of artificial inputs can be reduced in a variety blend, but it is not yet conclusive. It is clear that growing different variety blends adds another layer of risk management and helps make farming systems more resilient.

## Practical recommendations for selecting and growing a variety blend

- Mixtures of three or more varieties show the greatest potential for yield stability and reduction in disease.
- Aim for varieties with different parents and grandparents to ensure a broad genetic diversity.
- Look for varieties with similar maturity dates, try to avoid extreme height differences, and ensure that the blend includes varieties with good specific weight and straw strength.
- Look for high untreated yield, complementary resistances for pests, e.g. orange wheat blossom midge resistance, and all-round good disease resistance.
- Home-saving seed from a blend? Be aware that the following crop will not have the same variety ratio to the previous year, and the dominant variety may not always be best for the following season.
- End-users are currently less likely to accept blends for anything other than use as feed, so aim to have a contract in place before drilling.
- Check with the British Society of Plant Breeders for royalty payments on seed mixtures – [www.bspb.co.uk](http://www.bspb.co.uk)

