



Brassica and root fodder crops



Above: Weed seeds in brassica crops provide vital food for seed-eating birds through the winter.

Winter seed sources, such as weedy fodder crops, seed-rich cereal stubbles and grain/hay fed to out-wintered stock are scarcer today, especially in pastoral areas. Where weeds are allowed to set seed in fodder brassica and root crops, they provide an important winter food source for seed-eating birds. In addition, areas of bare ground and 'stubble' following these fodder crops can create suitable nesting habitat for some species in spring.

BENEFITS FOR WILDLIFE

Provide important seed food for birds

The seeds of broad-leaved weeds growing within fodder brassica and root crops such as fat hen, hemp-nettles and redshank are vital for the winter survival of birds such as tree sparrows, yellowhammers and twite, and also benefit game birds such as grey partridges.

Provide insect food

Fodder brassica and root crops are also a good source of insect prey due to the many insects that are associated with weeds. Thrushes, pipits and wagtails favour such crops in the winter as invertebrate prey are more available in the relatively warm wet microclimate of such crops.

Provide nesting habitat and other benefits to wildlife

Fodder crops also provide cover for birds and brown hares and following spring crops can provide nesting habitat for skylarks and lapwings. They may also provide an opportunity for rare arable plants to establish.

HOW CAN I MANAGE BRASSICA AND ROOT FODDER CROPS?

Which crops are best?

- All fodder crops have the potential to provide benefits to wildlife. Swedes, turnips, fodder rape and kale, and non-brassica fodder crops like fodder beet have all been shown to be important foraging habitats for seed-eating birds if broad-leaved weeds are present in the crop and allowed to set seed.

General management

- Management that promotes a satisfactory crop yield in association with beneficial weeds is desirable. While it may be necessary to control weeds in some crops during establishment, a moderate weed infestation later in the year has little effect on the yield of brassica crops, as they are good competitors with weeds once established.
- Fodder crops in a rotation with grassland are best fitted between short- or medium-term leys to keep the arable weed seed bank alive. Depending on the size of the arable weed seed bank, the majority of beneficial weeds are likely to become unviable within ten years, so need regular opportunities to germinate and seed to persist.
- Crops established by spraying off grassland with a broad-spectrum herbicide and direct drilling into the desiccated sward generally allow few beneficial weeds to establish. Crops established in a cultivated seedbed are likely to have greater wildlife value.
- Birds take weed seeds, both from within the crop, and after the crop is grazed. Some species prefer to forage in the cover of the crop, others like the bare ground with seeds

left after the crop has been grazed or harvested. Birds will continue to find seeds on this land until you turn over the ground. Strip grazing benefits birds by regularly opening up new feeding areas for such species through the winter.

- 'Stubbles' following fodder brassica and root crops such as typhon can attract nesting lapwings, particularly in larger, more open fields. If it is not possible to delay cultivations until chicks have hatched (generally May) then cultivations should either be carried out before lapwings turn up to breed in March or concentrated into as short a timescale as possible so birds can re-nest in the establishing spring crop.
- Maintaining an uncultivated grass margin adjacent to field boundaries provides a refuge for grassland plants and insects and reduces damage to the roots of hedges and trees.

Location of crops

- Different birds will have their favoured locations for feeding. Birds that use hedges and scrub as a refuge from predators will favour crops close to such cover, while birds, such as skylarks, that prefer open landscapes will favour crops in more open areas.
- Fodder brassica/root crops should not be grown on slopes with a high risk of soil erosion and runoff, or created by ploughing grasslands that have environmental or archaeological interest.

Soil and water protection

- Watercourses and ditches in crops grazed through the winter are particularly susceptible to soil erosion through livestock poaching and de-stabilising banks. Leaving an uncultivated and ungrazed grass buffer strip adjacent to such features will prevent damage.
- Strip grazing along the contour line, limiting periods of access, providing run-back areas and back-fencing are ways of minimising poaching and soil runoff.

KEY POINTS

- Fodder brassica and root crops provide habitat diversity in pastoral landscapes.
- Broad-leaved weed seeds within brassica and root fodder crops are an important food source for seed-eating birds.
- Fodder brassica and root crop 'stubbles' can provide an excellent nesting habitat for ground – nesting species.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Arable crops on livestock farms
- Overwintered stubbles.

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You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



The Advisory Manager,
RSPB Scotland, Dunedin House,
25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh
EH4 3TP Tel: 0131 311 6500

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SAC (Scottish Agricultural
College), King's Buildings, West
Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JG
Tel: 0131 535 4000



NFU Scotland, Head Office, Rural
Centre - West Mains, Ingliston,
Midlothian EH28 8LTel: 0131 472 4000



Scottish Natural Heritage
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Scottish Natural Heritage,
Great Glen House, Leachkin Road,
Inverness, IV3 8NW
Tel: 01463 725000

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