



Prospects for this year's harvest are upbeat, following the prolonged spell of warm, dry weather. Yield and quality are expected to exceed the last two seasons, say experts around the country.

Good yields expected as harvest draws near

Crops have started to tassle and the predicted harvest start date for the principle maize growing regions is mid-to-late September. The stage is also set for producers who planted a percentage of early maturing varieties to begin harvest and move directly into the main crop. Crops gathered at about 33 per cent dry matter should achieve above-average starch yields, which will encourage livestock feed intakes.

Brendan Paul of Agri reports establishment rates have been 'excellent' despite the problems which many growers experienced during drilling.

"We would normally expect to lose about 10 per cent of the crop, but plant populations of 95 per cent are not unusual this year. Cases where this figure is on the low side are generally confined to crops drilled into a



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BRENDAN PAUL

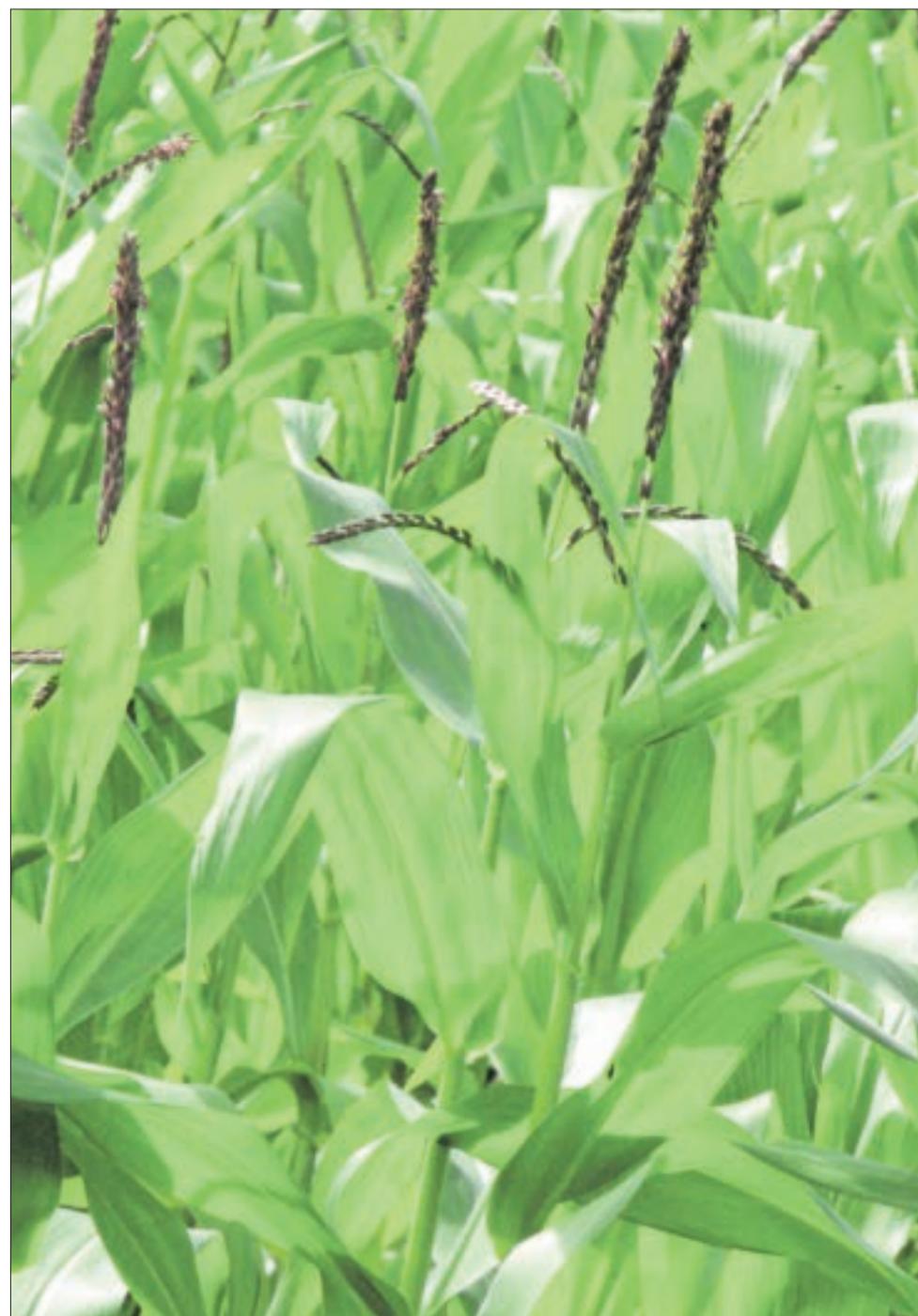
poor seedbed, but later plantings have caught up and are looking promising.

Flowering height

"In most crops, flowered silks are receptive, but some plants in the South West are flowering at below optimum height. The target height is 1.8-2.1 metres (6-7

feet), but I have seen crops at half of that. These are in a minority and should not prove disastrous for the grower, although it is possible to suffer yield losses of up to 40 per cent in this type of situation."

Along with good starch yields, the growing awareness of cell wall digestibility should con-



Brendan Paul says establishment rates have been 'excellent', despite issues many growers faced during drilling.

tribute to an overall improvement in maize feed values, he adds.

"There has been a shift in the requirements of livestock producers, who are increasingly seeking varieties which will give them quality, rather than quantity. The breeders have responded to market demand and the NIAB list now includes

a rating for cell wall digestibility, which gives a good indication of how a particular variety will feed out," says Mr Paul.

Maize under plastic has performed 'reasonably well' for the second year in succession, says Francis Dunne of Field Options. His latest assessment of trial plots suggests ultra/very earlies and earlies are doing well, with exceptional performance from Activate (Limagrain); Sergio (KWS); Severus (KWS) and Adept (Limagrain).

"The advantages of growing maize under plastic are usually greater on farms where soil conditions were optimum at planting," says Mr Dunne. "There is also more benefit to be gained when we have a cold spring, which would apply to this year."

Soil structure

"Unfortunately, the soil structure damage in 2012 continues to have a negative effect on crops, particularly on fields which were too wet for growers to mole plough in early season. There are some impressive crops about, but I don't think it's going to be a vintage year."

Maize under plastic is more



Francis Dunne

susceptible to weeds, Mr Dunne points out, because herbicide options are limited to products which can be applied before the crop is covered.

"One of my clients is reviewing his policy of using plastic, solely because weed problems are building up. Oilseed rape volunteers are often the main culprits, along with other brassicas, including runch and charlock, with the warmth plastic provides also suiting the weeds. In severe cases, the cover can be opened up, to allow further herbicide spraying, but this is a laborious task many growers understandably shy away from."

MAIZE FOR BIOGAS

THE area of maize planted for biogas reached about 15,000 hectares (37,065 acres) this season and it is forecast the acreage will continue to expand. The main factors driving demand are the popularity of maize for anaerobic digesters and the rising number of systems being commissioned.

Plant breeders have developed specific varieties of maize hybrids for the energy market, which is looking for very high dry matter yields per hectare. Energy growers, who are situated mainly in the east of the country, tend to have large acreages and they are selecting about 20 per cent

early or ultra-early varieties, with the aim of spreading harvest dates.

Ed Stevens of Hutchinsons mainly deals with biomass crops grown in the East of the country.

Performance

Back in February and March, growers' expectations were not high, but most maize is expected to give a reasonable performance compared with 2012, he says. The best maize can be found on land where the previous cropping was carrots and other roots under straw, with greater variability found on heavier soils, many

of which have not fully recovered from water-logging last year.

"It has been a growing season of extremes, with cold, wet weather followed by a very welcome period of high heat units," says Mr Stevens.

"In certain parts of the country, strong winds have caused some damage, although affected crops should still produce a decent cob."

In some instances, he has been recommending growers make a last-ditch attempt at maximising dry matter yields.

"We had a couple of weeks with very high temperatures and crops on lighter land