

## Oil Seed Rape



Oil seed rape, also known as rape and rapeseed, is a member of the mustard/ cabbage family. The word *rape* is derived from the Latin *rapum*, meaning turnip, a close relative of the modern day rapeseed plant. For the last month or so the bright yellow flowers of the oil seed rape have made a magnificent spectacle in our local landscape. It is either sown in the winter to be ready for harvesting in early August or is spring-sown to ripen later and be ready for harvest at the end of August or in September. Both crops are combine-harvested to yield tiny black seeds, destined to be crushed to produce oil for culinary and industrial use. The meal left after crushing the seeds is high in protein and ideal for use as animal feed.

Rapeseed oil is an important edible vegetable oil and, as it contains omega-3 fatty acids, is claimed to be heart-healthy. Many people believe there is a link between rapeseed pollen and asthma or hay fever. However, because rapeseed pollen is large and sticky, it is not blown far from the crop and may be mistakenly blamed for these respiratory ailments because it is such an obvious crop.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus, famous for his work on the naming of animals and plants, observed that oilseed rape improved the soil so helping the growth of subsequent crops, especially wheat. This role is still vital today and oilseed rape is known as a *break crop* - one that enhances soil quality and improves the yield of the next crop. Other important crops used in farm rotation include potatoes, sugar beet, peas and beans. Even rapeseed cannot be grown continuously as it too would suffer from a build-up of its own parasites and pests. So it is planted in the same field only once every four or so years.

In Britain, oilseed rape was little known before the 1970s, but now around 400,000 hectares of oilseed rape are grown annually, about one eighth of the area of wheat and barley. It is estimated that oilseed rape is the third leading source of vegetable oil in the world after soybean and palm oil.

Rapeseed flowers produce large quantities of nectar from which honeybees produce a pale, peppery honey. Because of its strong flavour, the honey is blended with milder honeys. In order to ensure successful crop pollination, which is necessary for seed development, rapeseed growers encourage beekeepers, which benefit both farmer and apiarist.

In addition to the food industry, rapeseed oil is also used in the manufacture of biodiesel, a motor fuel. A large percentage of vehicles in Europe run on diesel, and it is estimated that two-thirds of the total rapeseed oil currently grown in the EU is used for biodiesel production.