

Ten is the magic number for canola

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Photo: Canola Council of Canada

In a year like 2015, the little things add up.

“If we get lots of moisture early in the spring, you can just about broadcast your canola and it will grow,” Dan Orchard said at the Farming Smarter conference earlier this month.

“But when years are tough, that’s when a lot of these little things come into play. When you do the little things right, they add up on the bad years.”

Agronomic best practices — such as proper seeding depth and trash management — are “so important, especially in years like we just had,” said the Canola Council of Canada agronomist.

And that starts with your seeding rate.

“Targeting 10 plants per square foot is really important, and you could probably target a little higher even,” he said. “Frost and the insects all take a little bite out of your plants. You just have to accept the fact that you donate a few plants to Mother Nature.”

Five plants per square foot is needed to hit full yield potential.

“But if you’re starting at five, and frost takes one or two and flea beetles take one or two, you’re down to one or two plants, and you’re unable to reach your yield target.”

At three plants per square foot, there will be a big variation in yield, which makes it hard to know how much you can forward sell or contract.

But 10 plants per square foot is the sweet spot — despite the added seed cost.

“You’re going to be hitting 90 to 100 per cent of your target yield just by having those plants,” he said.

“It’s not cheap. I know seed is expensive. But that extra pound of seed can go a long way and really make up for some lost time if you’re behind in the spring.”

This year was a head-scratcher for canola growers across the Prairies.

“For a lot of our producers, it was a drought year, with a bumper crop and a wet harvest — those things shouldn’t go together,” said Keith Gabert, agronomist with the Canola Council of Canada.

This year looked like it would be a wreck right from seeding, said Gabert.

Moisture conditions at seeding ranged from “exceptionally dry to pretty good, depending on how early growers started seeding.” But it was another 60 days before producers saw any substantial rainfall, and by then, canola crops were already struggling.

“Typically, if we make mistakes at seeding, a half an inch of rain in the next seven to 14 days sort of forgives all of the challenges we’ve had — that didn’t happen,” he said.

“So we got fairly poor stand establishment, and we had patchy fields with thin patches.”

But even with the early-season struggles, the crop flowered after some late-season rain and yielded 1.5 million tonnes more than Statistics Canada estimated earlier in the growing season.

“We expected the crop to be small — smaller than we’d like — but I think most growers met or exceeded their target yields,” said Gabert. “They would have been happy with 10 bushels under their target yield when they looked at the crop in the middle of July.

“Not a single agronomist or grower I’ve talked to expected the kinds of yields they got.”

A small percentage of growers — around five per cent — never got rain, so “they got the yield they expected, which was exceptionally poor,” he said.

“But most growers in central Alberta found 10 to 25 bushels in their field per acre more than they would have predicted when they put a combine in.”