

Promoting Seed Innovation

Autumn 2026 Newsletter from the British Society of Plant Breeders

Do you know where your seed has come from?

Farm-saved seed can offer valuable flexibility, but engaging in illegal seed trading and buying seed from the wrong source could put your business at risk. BSPB auditors Jackie Albutt and Daniel Jefferson explain what farmers need to know about seed traceability, the rules around farm-saved seed and the importance of keeping accurate records.

Under the Plant Varieties Act 1997, farm-saved seed cannot be sold, traded or given away to another grower. It can only be used on the holding where it was produced.

With seed increasingly being advertised on platforms such as Facebook Marketplace, BSPB auditor Jackie Albutt is reminding farmers why trading certified seed without a license and farm saved seed crossing holdings are both illegal.

“Plant health is the major issue when seed from an unverified source is used, as it could introduce soil-borne diseases and weeds into your farm”.

A bargain bag of seed advertised online might look tempting, but you cannot guarantee where it has come from, or what it could be bringing onto your farm.

As not all farmers are aware that these restrictions apply, Jackie says that some end up declaring farm-saved seed acquired from neighbours or marketing their leftover seed online.

“When situations of illegal trading arise, we will inform the farmer of the legislation and their need to buy certified seed from a licensed merchant or use farm-saved seed from their own holding.”

Buying certified seed from a legitimate, reputable and licensed supplier is the only way to be confident in its origin, quality and traceability, helping farmers avoid unnecessary risks.



Keep your paperwork in order

Knowing where seed has come from is only part of the picture. Keeping accurate records is equally important, particularly when it comes to farm-saved seed declarations.

BSPB auditors regularly check seed merchants' and processors' records against declarations submitted to BSPB, identifying discrepancies and ensuring royalties are collected correctly.

Although farmers themselves are not audited by BSPB, they may be contacted to clarify their declarations, for reasons such as unusually high seed rates or missing variety names.

Jackie recommends keeping the following information readily available:

- **Certified seed:** purchase invoices showing the supplier, variety, quantity and date, alongside seed labels and drilling records
- **Farm-saved seed:** records of the variety, quantity used and any processing paperwork

Having this information to hand makes it easier to resolve queries and ensures royalties are allocated to the correct breeder.



Getting the figures right

“Accurate declarations aren’t simply about compliance. They also help ensure breeders receive the royalties they’re entitled to, providing funding to reinvest in developing new varieties” says BSPB auditor Daniel Jefferson.

That investment supports improvements in yield potential, disease resistance and other valuable traits that can help farmers manage changing growing conditions and reduce reliance on crop protection products.



For growers, the message is straightforward – know where your seed comes from, keep accurate records and make sure your declarations are correct.

These simple steps can help protect your business while supporting the development of better varieties for the future.

This attention to detail is equally as important from seed merchants and processors.

According to Daniel, most discrepancies uncovered during audits are simple administrative mistakes.

Errors can range from incorrect spreadsheet calculations to sales being missed from returns. Audits can also uncover overpayments, with refunds issued where appropriate.

People spotlight: Daniel Jefferson, BSPB auditor

What happens behind the scenes to make sure seed royalties reach the right breeders? We catch up with BSPB auditor Daniel Jefferson, who has spent eight years working with seed processors and merchants across the country, to find out what his job involves and why it matters to the industry.

Q: What does your job involve?

"We do around 250 audits across the country each year, visiting companies who process farm-saved seed for farmers and merchants who sell certified seed, to check that the declaration they have made matches the tonnage processed, and certified seed sold".

Q: What's the most rewarding part of your job?

"It's always rewarding when we find discrepancies because it means we're doing the job properly, but it's equally rewarding when there are none, because it means everyone is getting it right, from the processor to us.

Because we visit the processors regularly, we build good relationships with the teams and learn about the struggles facing their businesses".

Q: What's the biggest thing you've learned about farming since joining BSPB?

"As a consumer you don't see the struggle that goes into farming and developing new varieties – or the lost time and money if it all goes wrong. As an auditor, I get to go out to merchants, processors and breeders and learn about the challenges facing the sector".

Q: Why is your work important to the wider industry?

"Making sure royalties are paid and funds go to the correct breeder is important for ensuring that money can be reinvested back into research and development. As much as nobody likes paying royalties, if nobody did, the breeders would be unable to invest in developing new varieties, so ultimately the industry would lose out".



Get in touch

For any questions relating to these topics, or to complete your declaration, you can get in touch with our friendly Farm-Saved Seed team by sending in an email or picking up the phone:

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BSPB celebrates 60 years of plant breeding

“When we talk about plant breeding, it's easy to focus on varieties, traits and technology, which are all important. But at the heart of it, it's all about the people who have committed to this industry over the last 60 years,” said BSPB chairman Jonathan Tann, as he opened this year’s AGM.

Hosted at the historic Drapers’ Hall in London this October, our AGM welcomed a range of speakers reflecting on six decades of progress in plant breeding – and what the sector needs to do to rise to the challenges ahead.

“While farmers face increasingly challenging conditions, this progress has helped improve food security and ensure farm businesses are profitable and competitive,” Mr Tann said. “Much of that success can be tracked back to the innovation and investment made by plant breeders every year.”

A year of opportunity

Reflecting on the past year, he said it has been a year of change, but also of opportunity for BSPB.

“We've maintained effective royalty collection, improved communications with members, increased our visibility through social media and events, and started rebuilding and strengthening a number of important stakeholder relationships.”

Mr Tann also announced the appointment of Helen Fasham as CEO in October, who is a former joint head of Defra’s Plant Varieties and Seeds team, and brings extensive experience of agricultural policy, regulation and stakeholder engagement.

Meanwhile, Helen Wilson of RAGT, Mark Buckingham of Bayer and Roger Keeling from Elsoms, have joined as full members of the board of directors.



The future of BSPB

Looking ahead to the next six months, the Board is set to undertake a strategic review, and welcomes input from all members, stakeholders and anyone interested in plant breeding to help shape the organisation and future priorities.

“This important work is about building an organisation that is strong, focused, and ready for the future,” Mr Tann said.

The declining use of certified seed was named as a key area of concern for BSPB and the wider industry, given its importance in supporting continued investment in plant breeding, and Mr Tann said BSPB is working constructively with the industry to address this.

“BSPB also acts as a voice for the plant breeding sector, working with the government on a number of important policy issues such as precision breeding and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) agreement.

“These issues matter because they affect how quickly we can bring innovation to UK farmers, and we want to be more and more engaged to support breeding and agriculture as a whole,” he said.

Mr Tann concluded: “The challenges ahead are significant, but if the last 60 years have taught us anything, it's that this industry has a great capacity and ability to innovate and develop and deliver.

“At BSPB, we will focus on supporting the industry to continue that successful development and delivering strategies that make a difference for plant breeding in the UK.”

Saving the world’s largest seed bank

The AGM also celebrated the contribution of generations of plant breeders and scientists to our farming sector and food security today.

Simon Parkin, author of *The Forbidden Garden of Leningrad*, shared the story of Soviet botanists who protected what was then the world's largest seed collection during the 872-day siege of Leningrad in World War II.

Despite famine, bombings and vermin, staff refused to consume the specimens, and the collection was protected almost down to the last seed. Their sacrifice protected genetics that remain important for modern agriculture.

Plant breeding innovation

Professor Cristóbal Uauy, director at the John Innes Centre, talked about the work being done to utilise this genetic diversity going forward.

In the 1930s, botanist Arthur Watkins collected wheat varieties from around the world, creating a valuable source of genetic diversity that is still used by plant breeders today.

Researchers at the John Innes Centre have found that modern wheat breeding has only used around 40% of the genetic variation in this collection. They are now looking at how the remaining genetic diversity could be used to develop improved wheat varieties for the future.



Meanwhile, a recent grass pea trial with Traditional Norfolk Poultry and other partners looked at replacing imported soya in feed.

“Initially, we were able to replace 20% of the soya, but we’ve now shown that we can replace 100% of it with grass pea, while achieving equivalent weight gains and growth rates,” Professor Uauy said.

Another project is exploring the potential of high-fibre wheat to produce white bread with an improved nutritional profile.

However, he emphasised that collaboration with millers, food producers and other organisations across the supply chain will be essential to retain this added value and create market demand.

While genetics have a huge role to play in delivering food security, health and resilience over the next 25 years, Prof Uauy said partnerships and collaboration are essential to ensure these advances reach farmers and consumers – rather than remaining in the lab.

Farmer Feature: Ed Brown, Wildfarmed

Wildfarmed head of farming Ed Brown, another of our AGM speakers, explained why improved genetics are vital to reducing inputs – and why investment in plant breeding must continue.

New varieties must earn their place on the farm

For Ed Brown, the value of a new variety lies in what it can deliver in the field – not simply its headline yield.

As head of farming at Wildfarmed, he manages co-founder Andy Cato’s farm in the Cotswolds and oversees the in hand farming for Tatton Estate in Cheshire.

The National Trust farm near Farringdon has around 200ha of arable land, with herbal leys in rotation, producing milling wheat and malting barley for Wildfarmed products.

Keeping genetics up to date

The farm has bought certified seed for the past two years to introduce new varieties into its winter wheat blend.

This includes new variety Arlington alongside KWS Vibe, Goldfinch and Nelson, while the 2027 blend has been updated to exclude Cheer following challenges with yellow rust.

Mr Brown says: “When you need to freshen up the way you do things or utilise new traits, then it’s time to be looking for new varieties and buying certified seed.”

While farm-saved seed remains part of the farm’s approach, bringing in new genetics is important for accessing improved traits.

The farm is also growing KWS Solitaire, a group 3 biscuit wheat used by other Wildfarmed growers, to gain first-hand experience of how it performs.

“We’re particularly interested in varieties that are naturally suited to low input systems. The introduction of BYDV tolerance has been very welcome.”

Genetics and good farming practice

However, Mr Brown stresses that improved genetics must work alongside good soil health, diverse rotations and measures to encourage beneficial insects.

“We need to have good soil health and a solid system first, then varietal traits are the icing on the cake.”

With margins under pressure, traits that help reduce crop protection costs are particularly appealing, provided they deliver a worthwhile return.



“If a certain trait means you spend £40-50/ha less on spray inputs, that can only be a good thing, as long as the seed is not costing more than it’s saving.”

Investing in future varieties

Mr Brown believes continued investment in plant breeding is essential as farmers face increasingly unpredictable growing conditions and pressure to reduce inputs.

He is encouraged by the range of new varieties coming through, particularly in wheat categories where progress had previously been limited, including group 1 milling and group 3 biscuit wheats.

But maintaining this progress depends on breeders receiving a return on their investment.

Mr Brown completes farm-saved seed declarations for both farms and says the process is straightforward. Royalties collected by BSPB are returned to breeders, helping fund the long-term research needed to develop new varieties.

He concludes: “If you are utilising new traits and value the development of varieties to improve the way you farm, it’s a no-brainer that the money needs to go back to those breeders in order for the pipeline of new varieties to continue.”

