Adaptation to extreme conditions in wheat populations?

By Helen Pearce and Thomas Döring

Project outline

The Spring Wheat project, funded by The Organic Research Centre, is an extension of this, and asks the question: Can winter wheat populations adapt to extreme conditions? Here, the “extreme” condition that the winter wheat populations are being subjected to is drilling in spring.

The trial started in March 2008, and is now in its third year. According to theoretical expectations, in the first year very few plants would manage to flower successfully without vernalisation. We therefore expected the crop to yield poorly. On the other hand, it was also predicted that there would be some genotypes that can flower without the cold stimulus. These would go on to produce the seed that forms the basis for the subsequent year’s crop – simple survival of the fittest. Adaptation to such extreme conditions would then be proved if crop yields of the populations improve over time.

The winter wheat populations are being trialled alongside two commonly grown spring wheats, Paragon and Tybalt, as well as winter wheat mixtures. In the first year, the winter wheat populations performed outstandingly as a spring cereal – outyielding Paragon. However, in the second year of trials the population performance did not improve as we had expected, but was considerably poorer, yielding only about half that of the spring wheat varieties. It is likely that the results are dependent on the temperatures in late spring – if there is a cold spell after drilling, then vernalisation can still occur even with spring drilling, and this may go some way to explain the results we have seen so far.

For more information on this project contact:
Helen Pearce, The Organic Research Centre - Wakelyns Agroforestry, Fressingfield, Suffolk, IP21 5SD
Tel. office: 01379 586021

helen.p@organicresearchcentre.com