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Optimization of agricultural practices for crambe in Europe

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## Optimization of agricultural practices for crambe in Europe

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### ABSTRACT

Crambe (*Crambe abyssinica* Hochst R.E. Fries) has recently attracted a renewed interest by the bio-based industry due to its high seed oil content (up to 57%), particularly erucic acid (up to 65% of total fatty acids), short growing cycle, and high drought tolerance. A field trial was conducted during four consecutive growing seasons (2016-19) in Greece, Poland, and Italy. The commercial crambe variety (Galactica) was sown in early, intermediate, and late sowing dates in spring at two seeding rates (LD: 100 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>, and HD: 200 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>) in a factorial design at each test location. Mean crambe seed yields exceeded 1.5 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> across all years and locations. Italy and Greece were the most productive sites, with average seed yields of 2.11 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> and 1.97 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup>, respectively. Oil yield, which was only determined in Italy and Poland, was about 30% greater in the southern environment (Italy). Nevertheless, 1000-seed weight (TKW) was greater in Poland (6.49 g) than Italy (6.12 g), revealing that lower temperatures during seed filling resulted in heavier seeds. In conclusion, sowing

26 date played a key role in crambe productivity, with the earliest sowings resulting in greatest yields across all  
27 locations.

28

29 Key-words: Non-food crop; *Crambe abyssinica*; sowing date; seeding rate; seed yield; seed weight.

30

## 31 1. Introduction

32 Recently, the concept of bioeconomy has been introduced as a new paradigm to create, build up, and  
33 modernize economic systems based on a sustainable use of renewable biological resources (Aguilar et al.,  
34 2019), aimed at decoupling economic growth and exploitation of energy from fossil resources (Golembiewski et  
35 al., 2015). In this scenario, agriculture has been identified as a key sector in Europe for providing biobased  
36 feedstocks, like vegetable oils for biofuels and biobased materials to replace fossil resources. In particular, the  
37 industrial sector is searching for new raw materials to significantly replace fossil-based materials, which are  
38 constantly increasing in cost and a source of greenhouse gases (Carlsson et al., 2011). As a biobased feedstock,  
39 erucic acid is a long chain fatty acid (C22:1) with specific and well-established industrial applications, such as  
40 the production of erucamide (a slip agent for polyethylene production, Zorn et al., 2019), biolubricants, additives,  
41 and material for fibers (Zhu, 2016). Commonly, erucic acid is obtained from vegetable oils, in particular high  
42 erucic acid rapeseed (HEAR) (*Brassica napus* var. *oleifera*). However, cross-pollination problems of HEAR with  
43 canola quality rapeseed, which is cultivated worldwide, has raised concerns about the future large-scale  
44 production of HEAR without applying restrictions to prevent its gene flow (Samarappuli et al., 2020).  
45 Furthermore, because the seeds of HEAR and canola are physically identical, it is impossible to separate them  
46 during processing, causing problems with contamination since erucic acid is not legislated for food uses in both  
47 Europe (Regulation (EU) 2015/2284) and the USA (Abbott et al., 2003).

48 Crambe is a 1-m-tall herbaceous annual species belonging to *Brassicaceae* family and native to the  
49 Mediterranean. It can be an interesting source of erucic acid as an alternative to HEAR, due to its lower  
50 environmental impact (Krzyżaniak et al., 2013), higher erucic acid content, and morphologically different seeds

51 than HEAR, thus ensuring that rapeseed seed can be contaminated. In addition, crambe is characterized by a  
52 relatively short growing cycle (90-110 d, Zanetti et al., 2016), needing about 1300-1500 GDD (Growing Degree  
53 Days, with a base temperature of 5°C) from sowing to harvest (Meijer and Mathijssen, 1996), that makes it well  
54 fitting into conventional European crop rotations. It can be also easily harvested with common harvest machines  
55 (Pari et al., 2020). Crambe is also recognized for its high tolerance to drought (Pitol et al., 2010) and soil salinity  
56 (Ionov et al., 2013), wide adaptability to different environmental conditions (Von Cossel et al., 2019), limited seed  
57 shattering, and resistance to diseases and pests (Machado et al., 2007; Ropelewska et al., 2020). In Brazil,  
58 recent studies identified crambe as a suitable break crop in rotation with soybean or as a summer cover crop  
59 (Bordin et al., 2020; Secco et al., 2021). Furthermore, in a controlled environment study, Acharya et al. (2019)  
60 showed that crambe is a poor host for soybean cyst nematodes. Taken together, these characteristics make  
61 crambe cultivation possible even in marginal land, avoiding the competition for arable land currently used for  
62 food production (Von Cossel et al., 2019). Despite its adaptability, crambe seed and oil yield can be highly  
63 influenced by environmental conditions (Reginato et al., 2013; Zorzenoni et al., 2019), thus limiting the potential  
64 scale up of this oilseed crop. As reported by Falasca et al. (2010) frost damage can occur at seedling stage  
65 when temperature falls below -5°C. Another limiting factor is waterlogging (Zhu, 2016) that can cause sudden  
66 plant death and the occurrence of several diseases (Glaser, 1996; Viana et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a  
67 Mediterranean climate, high temperatures at the end of the growing cycle, in particular during seed filling phase,  
68 significantly reduced crambe seed yield (Zanetti et al., 2016). Row seeding can be performed by a small grain  
69 mechanic or pneumatic seeder, or by a cultipacker seeder (Oplinger et al., 1991). Row spacing can vary from  
70 0.12 and 0.90 m, but spacings, narrower than ≈0.30 m, usually improve seed yield reducing weed presence and  
71 promoting uniform maturity (Zoz et al., 2018). Seeding depth also deeply influences crambe performances, in  
72 particular sowing depths between 9-19 mm are recommended (Brandão et al., 2014), but in dry condition deeper  
73 sowing, up to ≈ 25 mm, promotes a better establishment (Oplinger et al., 1991).

74 Seed yields can vary greatly depending on growing environment; literature shows a seed yield from 0.97  
75 to 2.95 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> (dry matter basis) across different European countries (see Righini et al., 2016 and references  
76 therein). Seed oil content also greatly varies between 35-60% (Pitol et al., 2010), but the most recurrent values

77 are in the range of 35 to 45%, the main differences in oil content are due to seeding time or tested varieties  
78 (Samarappuli et al., 2020). Crambe meal, obtained after oil extraction, has a high protein content (>50% crude  
79 protein in hulled seeds, Samarappuli et al., 2020) and presents a digestibility similar to soybean meal. However,  
80 the presence of glucosinolates (70–150  $\mu\text{mol g}^{-1}$  in the seed), in particular *epi*-progoitrin, is toxic to monogastric  
81 animals (Tripathi and Mishra, 2007); its use in food/feed applications, therefore, can only be upon detoxifying  
82 the meal (Zhu, 2016). Additional uses of crambe oil can be for the production of jet-fuel or biodiesel (Cajamarca  
83 et al., 2018) as crambe oil being characterized by higher calorific value and oxidative stability compared with  
84 soybean (Wazilewski et al., 2013).

85 For those reasons, more knowledge is needed to make decisions about best sowing date, seeding rate,  
86 and the optimal growing location to improve crambe agronomic productivity in Europe. Thus, the scope of this  
87 study was to determine the effect of sowing date, seeding rate, and climate on the agronomic performance of  
88 crambe across a wide range of environments spanning Italy, Greece, and Poland.

89

## 90 2. Material and Methods

### 91 2.1 Experimental layout and agronomic management

92 The commercial crambe variety, Galactica (supplied by Wageningen University and Research,  
93 Wageningen, The Netherland), was evaluated in Cadriano (Italy), Aliartos (Greece) and Łężany (Poland) during  
94 multiple seasons (2016-2019). The specific soil and historical climatic characterizations of each location are  
95 reported in Table 1. While Cadriano (Italy) and Aliartos (Greece) are both located in the Mediterranean region,  
96 but are characterized by two different types of climate, namely Mediterranean north (Cadriano) and  
97 Mediterranean south (Aliartos), Łężany (Poland) has a continental climate (Metzger et al., 2005).

98 Galactica was sown in three consecutive spring sowing dates (SD1, SD2, and SD3) at each test location  
99 in three or four consecutive years from 2016 to 2019 (Table 2). Adverse meteorological conditions in 2018 in  
100 Italy only permitted establishment of SD3, thus the trial was repeated in 2019. The sowing dates were defined  
101 as early (SD1), intermediate (SD2) and late (SD3) considering the environmental specificities of each test

102 location and the growth needs of crambe (Samarappuli et al., 2020). Two different seeding rates were also  
103 compared at all locations and defined as: LD (= 110 seed m<sup>-2</sup> corresponding to 0.26 m interrow distance) vs. HD  
104 (= 220 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> corresponding to 0.13 m in Italy and Greece and 0.15 m in Poland interrow distance). The  
105 trials were arranged in a split-plot design with three or four replicates (depending on the location), with seeding  
106 time as the main plot and seeding rate as sub-plots. Individual sub-plot size was 1.7 m in Italy and Greece and  
107 1.5 m in Poland width (corresponding to 12 rows in the HD and 6 rows in the LD plot) and 6 m long. In Italy and  
108 Poland sowing was carried out mechanically using a plot seeder, whereas in Greece sowing was done manually.  
109 NPK fertilization was optimized at each location depending on soil type and nutrient availability aiming at  
110 maintaining crambe under non-limiting conditions, as reported in Table 1. All the trials were rainfed, apart from  
111 Aliartos (Greece) in 2016, where about 60 mm of water was applied by a sprinkler irrigation system to promote  
112 crambe establishment and early growth. Weed control was performed manually, and pest and disease control  
113 were never needed. Otherwise in Poland chemical treatments (Indoxacarb at a rate of 25.5 g ha<sup>-1</sup>), against  
114 diamondback moth (*Plutella xilostella*) were applied only in 2016.

115

## 116 2.2 Meteorological data

117 The main meteorological data, i.e. air temperature (minimum and maximum), daily precipitation, and  
118 number of rainy days were collected throughout the growing season by weather stations located nearby each  
119 experimental location (Table 2). GDD (Growing Degree days) were calculated for each location, seeding time,  
120 and growing season, from sowing to harvest using the following equation:

$$121 \text{ GDD} = \sum[(T_{\max} + T_{\min})/2 - T_{\text{base}}] \quad \text{Eq. (1)}$$

122 Where  $T_{\max}$  and  $T_{\min}$  are the maximum and minimum air temperature, respectively, and  $T_{\text{base}}$  for crambe was  
123 defined as 5°C (Meijer and Mathijssen, 1996).

124 Additional meteorological variables were calculated to further explain variations in crambe productivity  
125 across locations using the following equations:

$$126 \text{ Precipitation/rainy d} = \frac{\text{cumulative precipitation from sowing to harvest}}{\text{number of rainy days from sowing to harvest}} \quad \text{Eq. (2)}$$

127 
$$\text{GDD/rainy d} = \frac{\sum[(T_{\text{max}}+T_{\text{min}})/2 - T_{\text{base}}]}{\text{number of rainy d from sowing to harvest}} \quad \text{Eq. (3)}$$

128

### 129 2.3 Plant measurements

130 At all locations, harvesting was carried out in the same way. Before harvest, plant height was measured  
131 as the mean height of the crambe stand in each plot. When crambe plants reached maturity (i.e., residual seed  
132 moisture content < ~12%) the central portion of each plot, corresponding to 6 m<sup>2</sup>, was manually cut at soil level  
133 and then threshed. Seed and straw (i.e., plant residue after removing seed) were individually weighted, and  
134 representative subsamples were oven dried at 105°C until constant weight to determine residual moisture. Straw  
135 and seed yields were adjusted to dry matter (DM). After harvest, only in Italy and Poland, the number of plants  
136 in two central 1-m-long rows of each plot were counted to determine plant density. Also, in Italy and Poland on  
137 representative sub-samples of seeds from individual plots, the thousand kernel weight (TKW) was determined  
138 by averaging the weight of 3 replicates of 1000 seeds each.

139 Oil content was determined in crambe seed samples from Italy and Poland only for the HD plots,  
140 adopting the following methodology. About 30 g of crambe seeds (including silicles) were ground in a coffee  
141 grinder for 40 s. An aliquot corresponding to 1.5 g of ground material was exactly weighed in a cellulose  
142 extraction thimble (22 × 80 mm), which was then inserted in a 30 mL glass extractor. Lipid extraction was  
143 performed in an in-line extraction unit for Soxhlet extraction (mod. R 306) from Behr Labor-Technik (Düsseldorf,  
144 Germany), using 60 mL of n-hexane as organic solvent. Soxhlet extraction was carried out for 2 h from the start  
145 of solvent siphoning into the round bottom flask placed on the heating element. Some pieces of pumice stone  
146 were added to the distillation flask to avoid bumping of liquid as the temperature increased. The extract  
147 containing the lipidic fraction was dried for 90 min over anhydrous sodium sulphate at 4°C, occasionally shaking.  
148 The organic solvent was then filtered over sodium sulphate in a 100 mL flat bottom flask and removed under  
149 reduced pressure at 30 °C in a rotary evaporator. The residual oil was further dried under nitrogen flow for 5 min  
150 keeping the flask in a water bath (50-55°C) and exactly weighed. Crambe oil yield was calculated multiplying  
151 the dry seed yield by the seed oil content. Fatty acid methyl esters (FAME) of crambe seed oil were quantified



152 using gas chromatography according to the methods of Christopherson and Glass (1969), only in the samples  
153 from Italy.

154

## 155 2.4 Statistical analysis

156 Prior to ANOVA, the homoscedasticity of variance was verified with Bartlett's Test for  $P \leq 0.05$ . A 3-way  
157 ANOVA was adopted to test the effect of location, seeding time, and seeding rate on crambe straw yield, seed  
158 yield, and final plant height. For final plant density, seed weight (TKW) and oil yield, only data from Italy and  
159 Poland were compared in a 3-way ANOVA to test the effect of seeding time, seeding rate, and location. When  
160 ANOVA revealed statistically different means, the LSD, Fisher's test, was used to separate means ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).

161 Linear regression was used to understand the effect of different meteorological variables on the surveyed  
162 agronomic parameters. When the regression was found significant for  $P \leq 0.05$  the coefficient of determination  
163 ( $r^2$ ) has been reported. All the statistical analyses were carried using the Statgraphics Centurion 18 software  
164 (ver. 18.1.13, Statgraphics Technologies Inc., Virginia, USA).

165

## 166 3. Results

### 167 3.1 Meteorological data analysis and crop development

168 The meteorological conditions surveyed in the study were consistent with the typical climate of each test  
169 location during crambe growth cycle. The locations differed more in terms of precipitation than temperatures  
170 (Table 2). Aliartos (Greece) was the driest site, with on average 84 mm of precipitation from sowing to harvest,  
171 and in 2016, seeding time SD2 and SD3 received less than 30 mm of precipitation, thus requiring irrigation.  
172 Cadriano (Italy) had on average about 200 mm of precipitation from sowing to harvest, but in 2017 this amount  
173 was only half as much. Łężany (Poland) was the wettest site, but again there was great variation across years  
174 with cumulative precipitation ranging from 134 mm for SD2 in 2018, up to 405 mm for SD1 in 2016. Despite the  
175 variability in seasonal precipitation crambe developed well in all the test locations.

176 The mean Galactica thermal time from sowing to harvest was 1265 GDD, considering the different  
177 seeding time and locations (Table 2). Greece reported the lowest (965 GDD in 2017 SD1) and the highest values  
178 (1461 GDD in 2018 SD1) for GDD, presumably in relation to greater temperature variation across years and  
179 seeding time accompanied with extreme precipitation variability. In Italy and Poland, GDD were less variable,  
180 with a mean value of 1265 GDD in Cadriano (Italy) and 1352 GDD in Łężany (Poland), corresponding to at least  
181 ~100 d with a maximum of 130 d in Łężany (Poland) in 2016 (SD1) from sowing to harvest. Crambe crop cycle  
182 (Table 2) was always longer in the earlier seeding time (SD1) in Italy and Poland, while in Greece there was  
183 little variation across years and seeding time, with Galactica maturity averaging 88 d.

184

### 185 3.2 Crambe crop performance

186 All crop productivity parameters were significantly ( $P \leq 0.05$ ) influenced by location, while seeding time  
187 affected only plant height at harvest, seed yield, and 1000-seed weight (TKW) (Table 3). Seeding rate had a  
188 significant effect only on seed yield and final plant density (Table 3). A significant location x seeding time  
189 interaction ( $P \leq 0.05$ ) was detected for seed yield (Table 3).

190 Straw yields were significantly greater ( $P \leq 0.05$ ) in Greece and Italy, averaging 3.79 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM, than  
191 at Poland, which averaged 2.20 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM (Fig. 1): a 42% reduction in comparison. Crambe seed yield was  
192 the most variable parameter across test locations, years, seeding rates, and sowing dates, showing a high  
193 variation coefficient (CV=0.34). Seed yield was the highest in Italy (2.11 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM), but not different than in  
194 Greece, where the mean value was 1.97 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM. Again, Poland was the least productive site reporting a  
195 mean seed yield of 1.73 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM. Seed yield also varied significantly among sowing dates and seeding rates  
196 (Table 3). In particular, the delay of sowing caused a linear decrease in the seed yield ( $P \leq 0.05$ ). The highest  
197 seed yield was achieved in the earliest sowing date (SD1) with a mean of 2.25 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM. When sowing was  
198 delayed, there was a 15% decline in yield between SD1 and SD2 and again from SD2 to SD3. Seeding rate  
199 played a role in crambe seed yield and higher rate significantly increased seed yields (2.02 vs. 1.83 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM  
200 in HD and LD respectively,  $P \leq 0.05$ , Fig. 2A). The interaction between location and seeding time significantly  
201 affected crambe seed yield (Fig. 2B). There were no significant differences among sowing dates in Italy; while

202 in Poland there was a difference between SD1 and SD3. In Greece crambe seed yield steadily declined from  
203 SD1 to SD3, and the early sowing in Greece (SD1) had the highest yield across all locations and sowing date,  
204 averaging 2.74 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM ( $P \leq 0.05$ ). Final plant density, which was only measured in Italy and Poland,  
205 confirmed that higher seeding rate promoted greater plant density at harvest (Fig. 3). However, in Italy, crambe  
206 stands had more than double the number of plants (75 plants m<sup>-2</sup>) than in Poland (35 plants m<sup>-2</sup>) (Fig. 3), and  
207 this might partially explain the higher seed yield surveyed in Italy compared with Poland. Crambe plant height at  
208 harvest was affected by both location and seeding time (Table 3). In Italy, crambe produced the tallest plants  
209 (1.05 m), while in Greece they were the shortest (0.75 m,  $P \leq 0.05$ ). When considering the effect of sowing date,  
210 SD3 showed significantly taller plants compared with SD1 and SD2, but the differences was minimal (i.e. +6%  
211 and +8% SD1 compared with SD2 and SD3, respectively). Location and sowing date significantly affected TKW  
212 ( $P \leq 0.05$ ) (Fig. 4). Galactica produced heavier seeds in Poland than in Italy (6.49 vs. 6.12 g TKW, in Poland and  
213 Italy, respectively  $P \leq 0.05$ ). The effect of seeding time on TKW was similar to that found for seed yield. A linear  
214 decrease (~10%) was measured in TKW between SD1 and SD2, and between SD2 and SD3 ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).  
215 **Furthermore, crambe oil yield in Italy was found to be 32% greater than in Poland (Fig. 5).**

216 Significant linear relationships were measured for crambe final plant density, plant height at harvest,  
217 TKW, and oil yield when regressed against specific meteorological variables (Fig. 6). However, for seed yield,  
218 none of the considered meteorological variables showed a significant relationship. In particular, final plant  
219 density (plants m<sup>-2</sup>) was significantly and positively related with the ratio precipitation/rainy d ( $r^2 = 0.38$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ),  
220 showing that plant density increased when precipitation exceeded a certain amount (~13 mm) for each rain  
221 event. Plant height at harvest showed a negative relation with the ratio GDD/rainy d ( $r^2 = 0.29$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), indicating  
222 that height declined with both higher GDD and low precipitation availability. Crambe TKW was negatively related  
223 to mean maximum temperature from sowing to harvest ( $r^2 = 0.34$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), indicating that higher temperatures  
224 induced crambe to form lighter seeds. Finally, crambe oil yield showed a positive relation with GDD ( $r^2 = 0.37$ ,  
225  $P < 0.01$ ), demonstrating that longer thermal time from sowing to harvest promoted greater oil yield.

226

227 4. Discussion

228 For many years crambe has been studied for its feasible introduction into European cropping systems  
229 as a source of high erucic seed oil. Despite growing interest by the biobased industry, crambe cultivation has  
230 never taken off in Europe, and only sporadically worldwide. Crambe oil is characterized by high compositional  
231 stability (Sokólski et al., 2020), and so has great potential as an ideal feedstock for the biobased industry. In the  
232 present study, this quality trait of crambe was confirmed. Seed oil composition was analyzed only in Italy (data  
233 not presented), and a mean erucic acid content of 54% DM was measured, irrespective of growing seasons and  
234 seeding time, a value in line with other studies in similar environments (Fanigliulo et al., 2021; Zanetti et al.,  
235 2016). As far as authors know, this is the first study in which the same crambe variety, was grown under very  
236 different environmental conditions (Greece, Italy, and Poland). The present results confirmed the broad  
237 environmental suitability of crambe to European climates, as previously reported by several authors (Righini et  
238 al., 2016; Stolarski et al., 2018; Von Cossel et al., 2019). Galactica was able to produce adequate seed yields  
239 ( $>1.5 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1} \text{ DM}$ ) even when precipitation was very limited ( $<50 \text{ mm}$ , from sowing to harvest) and its growth  
240 cycle short ( $\sim 80 \text{ d}$ ). Moreover, Galactica's growth cycle was found stable across the different locations and  
241 seeding time, with values similar to that previously reported (Meijer et al., 1999). This trait might be of interest  
242 for crambe inclusion in European rotations, since farmers appreciate having clear and fixed windows for  
243 harvesting new crops to better manage farm labor and equipment.

244 In the present study, higher seed yields were achieved in Greece and Italy (southern sites), rather than  
245 Poland (northern site), while Zanetti et al. (2016), when comparing two locations in Italy, observed lower  
246 production in southern Italy (i.e. Sicily), where higher temperatures at the end of the growing cycle may have  
247 impeded crambe growth and productivity. In the present study, average growing season temperatures were  
248 similar across locations (Table 2). Because seeding time were optimized to local conditions, the lower  
249 productivity in Poland might have been associated with excessive and uneven precipitation. This may have  
250 interfered with germination, flowering, or seed formation phases. Crambe has been shown to have tolerance to  
251 water limitation (Machado et al., 2007), and is negatively impacted by excessively wet conditions (Sammarapuli  
252 et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2000). The suitability of crambe to milder and drier conditions was indicated by the  
253 relationship between final plant height and the GDD/rainy d ratio (Fig. 7), demonstrating that crambe preferred

254 environments with higher temperatures and precipitation concentrated in single events rather than spread along  
255 the cycle. Seed yield in Poland (1.73 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM) is similar to values observed by Sokólski et al. (2020), and  
256 slightly higher than those found by Krzyżaniak and Stolarski (2019), who reported a maximum value of 1.51 Mg  
257 ha<sup>-1</sup> DM in large scale trials (>1 ha). Crambe seed yields in Italy (grand mean 2.11 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM) are considerably  
258 higher than those previously reported by Laghetti et al. (1995), possibly due to improved genetics of *Galactica*  
259 compared with older accessions. Other Italian studies (Fontana et al., 1998; Zanetti et al., 2016) reported that  
260 crambe could exceed 3 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM in northern Italy, indicating high variability for seed yield. In agreement with  
261 Meijer et al. (1999), a compensation effect between seed yield and seed weight was observed in the present  
262 study, in fact in Poland, despite lower yields, crambe seed weight was significantly higher than in Italy. Also, oil  
263 yield was promoted with increased GDD accumulation (Fig. 6), confirming the higher suitability of crambe to  
264 northern Italy compared with Poland. The reported oil yields - ranging from 0.58 to 0.76 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM in Poland  
265 and Italy, respectively - are similar to other European reports (Fontana et al., 1998; Zanetti et al., 2016) and are  
266 also consistent with recent studies in Brazil (Secco et al., 2021). Oil yield values above 0.3 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> DM could  
267 be considered a reliable breakeven yield for calculating the profitability of crambe as demonstrated by Stolarski  
268 et al. (2018). Thus, the reported oil yields could assure a net income to farmers, particularly when crambe is  
269 sown in early spring or grown in southern European regions. Therefore, the definition of the optimal seeding  
270 time remains a strategic point for the future scale up of crambe. In particular, early sowing assured significantly  
271 higher seed yields in Greece, while in Italy and Poland the differences among seeding time was less variable  
272 (Fig. 2, bottom graph). As reported by Zanetti et al. (2016), in the southern Mediterranean climate the  
273 identification of optimal sowing time for crambe to achieve high yields needs to consider sowing early enough  
274 to avoid high temperatures (>35°C) during seed maturation. Different than in previous studies (Laghetti et al.,  
275 1995; Zanetti et al., 2016), in the present trials, crambe was sown in autumn in Greece because previous  
276 unpublished tests showed susceptibility to frost damage, making autumn sowing very challenging and with yield  
277 results lower than in spring sowing (A. Alexopoulou, personal communication).

278 Crambe seed weight (TKW) was also influenced by seeding time. In contrast with the study by Adamsen  
279 and Coffelt (2005), which reported no significant differences between seeding time, in the present study the

280 earliest seeding time resulted in significantly higher TKW, and a progressive reduction was observed when  
281 delaying seeding time. This demonstrated that increased temperature during seed filling can reduce seed weight  
282 (Zanetti et al., 2016). Furthermore, the regression analysis (Fig. 6) highlighted that the higher maximum  
283 temperatures caused the formation of lighter seeds in the warmer conditions, i.e. southern environment and/or  
284 delayed seeding time.

285 For alternative crops, like crambe, for which selective herbicides are not yet available, the identification  
286 of the optimal seeding rate results a crucial aspect for their agronomic management. In the present study,  
287 seeding rate significantly affected only final plant density and seed yield, which were higher under the highest  
288 density (HD). Thus, a seeding rate of 220 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> was identified as appropriate to achieve sustained seed  
289 yield, irrespectively of the growing environment nor the seeding time. The tested HD seeding rate assured a  
290 better soil coverage, in accordance with the results by Viana et al. (2015). Nevertheless, a doubling of the  
291 seeding rate (HD) only increased final plant stand by 38%, presumably in relation to increased competition for  
292 available resources (i.e., space, nutrients, water, etc.). Thus, further studies are needed for the fine tuning of  
293 crambe seeding rate, in particular when using pneumatic precision seeders, as in the case of rapeseed.

294

## 295 5. Conclusions

296 The commercial crambe variety Galactica was successfully cultivated in Europe across different  
297 locations and climates, but sowing date needed to be tailored to local conditions to maximize yield. In the  
298 Mediterranean region, early sowing between mid-February and early March allowed achieving the best  
299 productivity, likely by avoiding drought and extreme high temperatures during anthesis and seed development.  
300 In Northern Europe, spring sowing should be performed in early to mid-April to avoid low temperature and/or  
301 freezing injure. The adoption of higher seeding rate promoted seed yield and soil coverage, thus representing  
302 the best option for establishing crambe in Europe, irrespectively of seeding time. In the present study the  
303 southern sites (i.e., Italy or Greece) resulted more suitable for crambe cultivation than the northern one (i.e.,  
304 Poland), but the productive performance of crambe was always above the economic threshold for farmers'  
305 profitability.

306

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314

315 CRediT authorship contribution statement

316 **Sara Berzuini**: Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing - original draft; **Federica Zanetti**: Conceptualization;  
317 Data curation; Methodology; Software, Formal analysis; Writing - original draft; **Myrsini Christou**: Writing -  
318 review & editing; **Efthymia Alexopoulou**: Data curation; Writing - review & editing; **Michal Krzyżaniak**: Data  
319 curation; Writing - review & editing; **Mariusz J. Stolarski**: Writing - review & editing; **Federico Ferioli**: Data  
320 curation; Formal analysis; Writing - review & editing; **Andrea Monti**: Conceptualization; Funding acquisition;  
321 Supervision; Writing - review & editing

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446 Figure 1. Crambe straw yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the main effect  
447 location (Italy vs. Greece vs. Poland). Different letters: significant different means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD's Fisher test).

448 Figure 2. A: Crambe seed yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the main  
449 effect seeding rate (HD 220 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> vs. LD 110 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>). Different letters: significant different means for  
450  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD Fisher's test). B: Crambe seed yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in  
451 response in response to the interaction between location and sowing date. Different letters: significant different  
452 means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD's Fisher's test).

453 Figure 3 Final crambe plant density (pp m<sup>-2</sup>) at harvest in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to  
454 the main effects: location (Italy vs. Poland) and seeding rate (HD 220 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> vs. LD 110 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>). Different  
455 letters: significant different means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD Fisher's test) within the same main effect.

456 Figure 4. Crambe thousand seed weight (TKW, g) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the  
457 main effects: location (Italy vs. Poland) and sowing date (SD1 vs. SD2 vs. SD3). Different letters: significant  
458 different means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD Fisher's test) within the same main effect.

459 Figure 5. Crambe oil yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the main effect:  
460 location (Italy vs. Poland). Different letters: significant different means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD Fisher's test).

461 Figure 6. Significant linear regressions between crambe final plant density, plant height, TKW, and oil yield and  
462 meteorological variables for data from Italy and Poland.  $r^2$ = Coefficient of determination. \*\* = significant for  
463  $P \leq 0.01$ .

464

465 Table 1. Geographical coordinates, soil type, historical climatic data (20-years), soil tillage and NPK fertilization  
 466 adopted in the crambe trials are reported.

Country	Italy	Greece	Poland
Location	Bologna	Aliartos	Łężany
Coordinates	44° 33' N, 11° 23' E	38° 22' N, 23° 06' E	53° 58' N, 21° 08' E
Soil Type	Clay Loam	Sandy Loam	Sandy Loam
Mean annual precipitation (mm)	613	485	683
Mean annual temperature (°C)	13.4	16.7	8.0
Tillage for seedbed preparation	Ploughing + rotary tilling	Ploughing + rotary tilling	Ploughing +rotary tilling + harrowing + rolling
NPK fertilization (kg ha <sup>-1</sup> )	50+0+0	83+45+45	120+0+0

467

468 Table 2. Sowing and harvesting dates, Growing Degree Days (= GDD), cycle length (d) from sowing to harvest,  
 469 and main meteorological parameters surveyed in the crambe multi-year (2016-2019) trial grown across three  
 470 locations in Europe. GDD = growing degree days from sowing to harvest; Prec = cumulative precipitation from  
 471 sowing to harvest;  $T_{\min}$  = mean minimum temperature from sowing to harvest;  $T_{\max}$  = mean maximum  
 472 temperature from sowing to harvest.

Country (Location)	Year	ST	Sowing date	Harvest	GDD*	Cycle (d)	Rain. (mm)	$T_{\min}$	$T_{\max}$ °C
Greece (Aliartos)	2016	SD1	Mar 08	Jun 15	1237	104	88	10.5	23.3
		SD2	Mar 21	Jun 18	1203	90	25.5	11.5	25.2
		SD3	Apr 05	Jun 23	1209	80	9.9	13.1	27.1
	2017	SD1	Feb 28	May 26	964	88	164	8.4	21.1
		SD2	Mar 19	Jun 12	1157	86	133.3	10.6	23.4
		SD3	Apr 03	Jun 18	1146	77	132.7	11.9	24.6
	2018	SD1	Mar 03	Jun 10	1461	100	61.2	9.5	22.2
		SD2	Mar 19	Jun 15	1416	89	58.7	9.6	22.8
		SD3	Apr 03	Jun 20	1378	79	65.2	10.4	24.4
Average				1241	88	82	10.3	23.8	
Italy (Bologna)	2016	SD1	Feb 12	Jun 20	1158	128	383.2	8.9	19.0
		SD2	Mar 15	Jun 30	1355	108	226.6	11.1	22.5
		SD3	Mar 30	Jul 17	1457	106	247.8	13.1	24.5
	2017	SD1	Feb 17	Jun 14	1169	118	106.8	8.3	21.5
		SD2	Mar 01	Jun 14	1147	106	105.6	9.0	22.5
		SD3	Mar 15	Jun 21	1219	99	103.6	10.5	23.9
	2018	SD3	Mar 27	Jul 05	1341	101	127.6	13.2	25.3
	2019	SD1	Feb 13	Jun 26	1253	134	229.8	7.8	20.8



		SD2	Feb 28	Jun 26	1228	119	229.6	8.9	21.5
		SD3	Mar 14	Jul 04	1329	113	231.0	10.3	22.9
Average					1206	113	199.2	10.1	22.4
Poland	2016	SD1	Apr 05	Aug 08	1339	130	405.3	10.4	20.7
(Łężany)		SD2	Apr 15	Aug 12	1286	120	391.0	10.7	21.2
		SD3	Apr 25	Aug 21	1365	119	404.2	11.4	22.0
	2017	SD1	Apr 10	Aug 16	1281	129	237.4	8.5	20.9
		SD2	Apr 20	Aug 16	1270	119	212.4	9.1	21.8
		SD3	Apr 28	Aug 25	1325	120	212.2	9.9	22.6
	2018	SD1	Apr 16	Aug 03	1430	110	145.2	10.8	24.6
		SD2	Apr 26	Aug 07	1416	104	134.4	11.4	25.4
		SD3	Apr 28	Aug 16	1459	102	165.4	12.3	25.9
Average					1352	144	256.4	10.5	22.8

473 \*base temperature for GDD calculation was 5°C (Meijer and Mathijssen. 1996)

474

475

476 Table 3. ANOVA results (F-values and Statistical significance) for the surveyed parameters (Straw yield, seed  
 477 yield, plant height, final plant density, oil yield and TKW) in the multi-year multi-location trails on crambe. Loc =  
 478 location (Greece vs. Italy vs. Poland); SD = sowing date (SD1 vs. SD2 vs. SD3); SR = seeding rate (HD 220  
 479 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> vs. LD 110 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>).

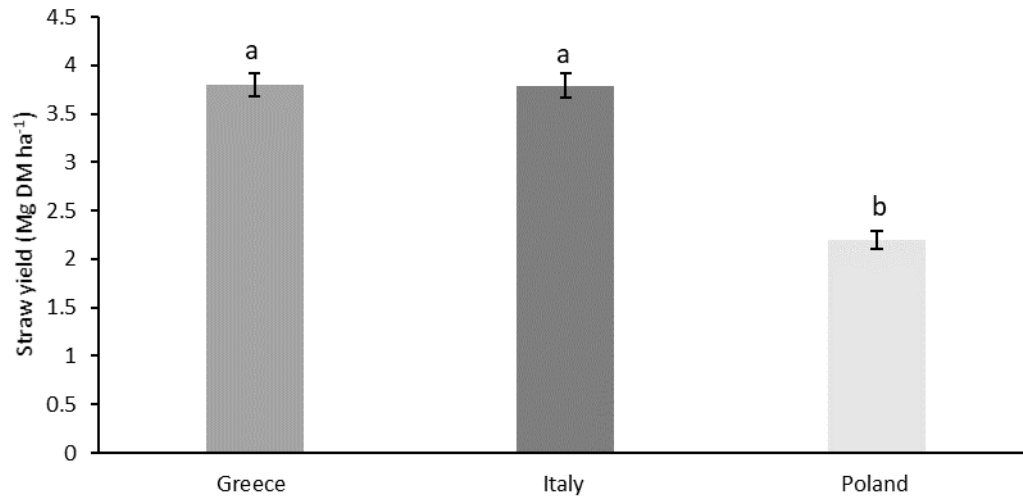
Source of Variation	Straw yield	Seed yield	Plant height	Final plant density <sup>1</sup>	Oil yield <sup>2</sup>	TKW <sup>1</sup>
Loc	61.26 **	8.45**	79.12**	60.13**	21.11**	7.94**
SD	2.48 <i>ns</i>	24.79***	3.35*	1.58 <i>ns</i>	2.29 <i>ns</i>	33.06**
SR	2.68 <i>ns</i>	4.41*	2.19 <i>ns</i>	11.67**	-	0.04 <i>ns</i>
Loc x SD	1.13 <i>ns</i>	9.15**	2.02 <i>ns</i>	2.40 <i>ns</i>	0.61 <i>ns</i>	1.06 <i>ns</i>
Loc X SR	2.48 <i>ns</i>	1.78 <i>ns</i>	0.85 <i>ns</i>	3.28 <i>ns</i>	-	0.01 <i>ns</i>
SD X SR	0.13 <i>ns</i>	0.06 <i>ns</i>	0.04 <i>ns</i>	0.24 <i>ns</i>	-	0.43 <i>ns</i>
Loc X SD X SR	1.39 <i>ns</i>	0.15 <i>ns</i>	0.87 <i>ns</i>	0.82 <i>ns</i>	-	0.14 <i>ns</i>

480 \*, \*\* Significant at the 0.05, 0.01 probability levels, respectively (LSD Fishers' test); *ns*=not significant.

481 <sup>1</sup> only data from Italy and Poland are included in the ANOVA

482 <sup>2</sup> only data from Italy and Poland from only HD plots are included in the ANOVA

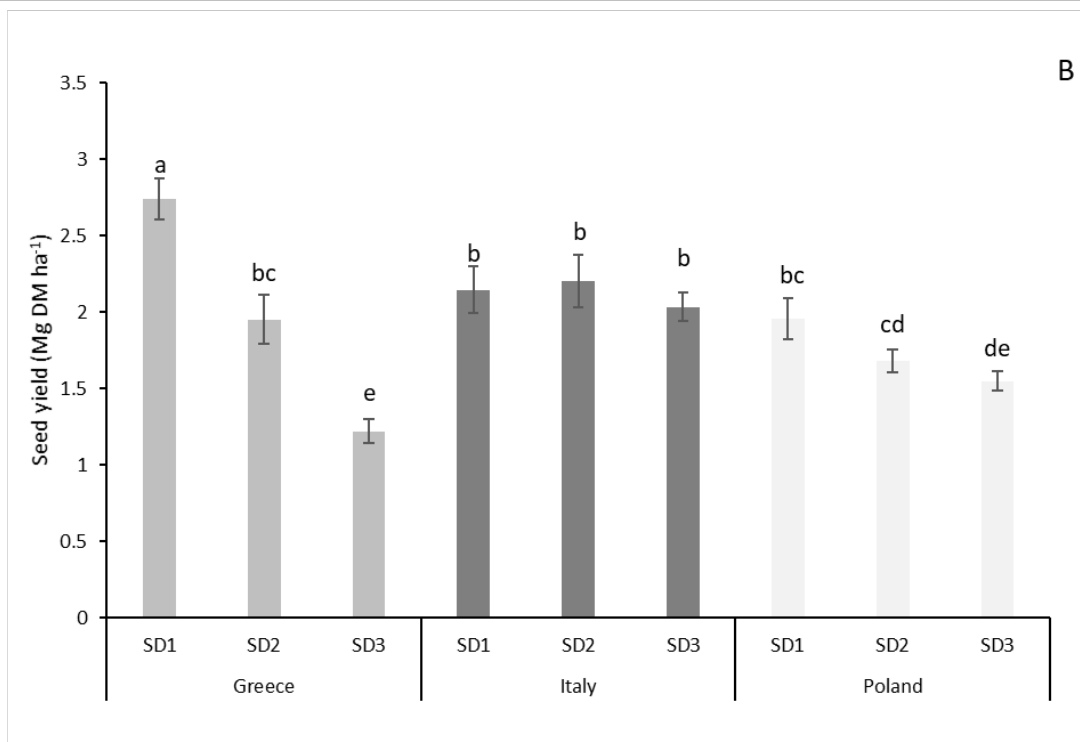
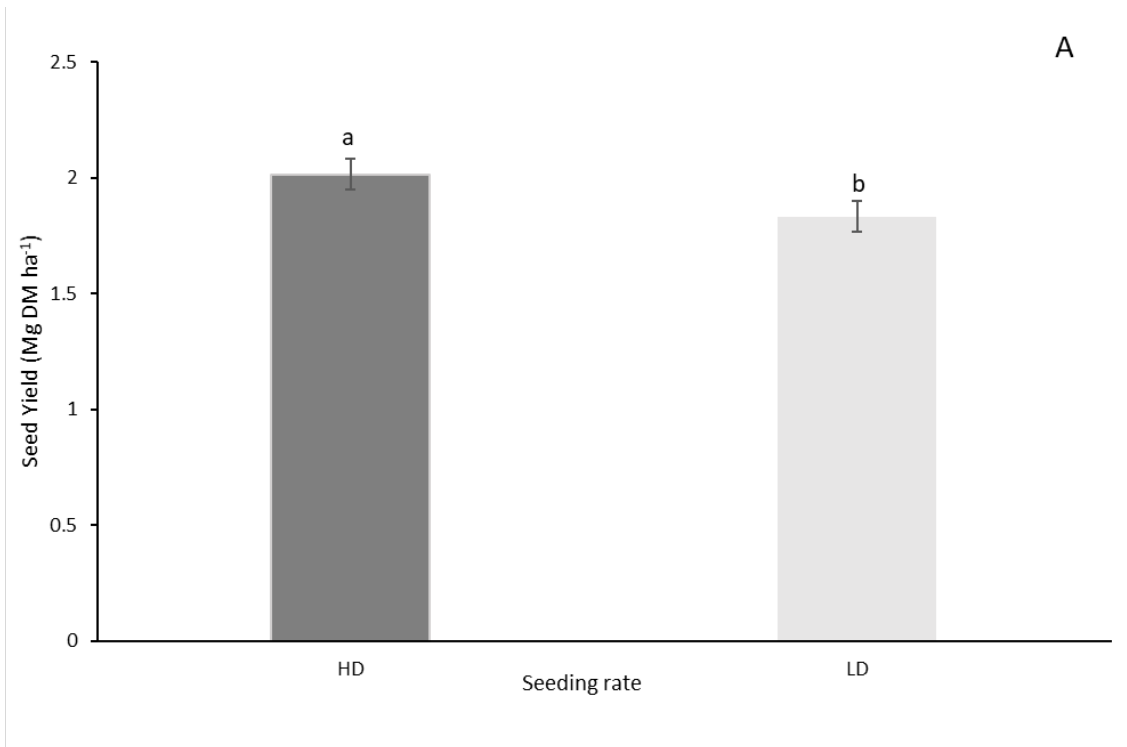
483 Figure 1. Crambe straw yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the main effect  
484 location (Italy vs. Greece vs. Poland). Vertical bars: standard error. Different letters: significant different means  
485 for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD's Fisher test).



486

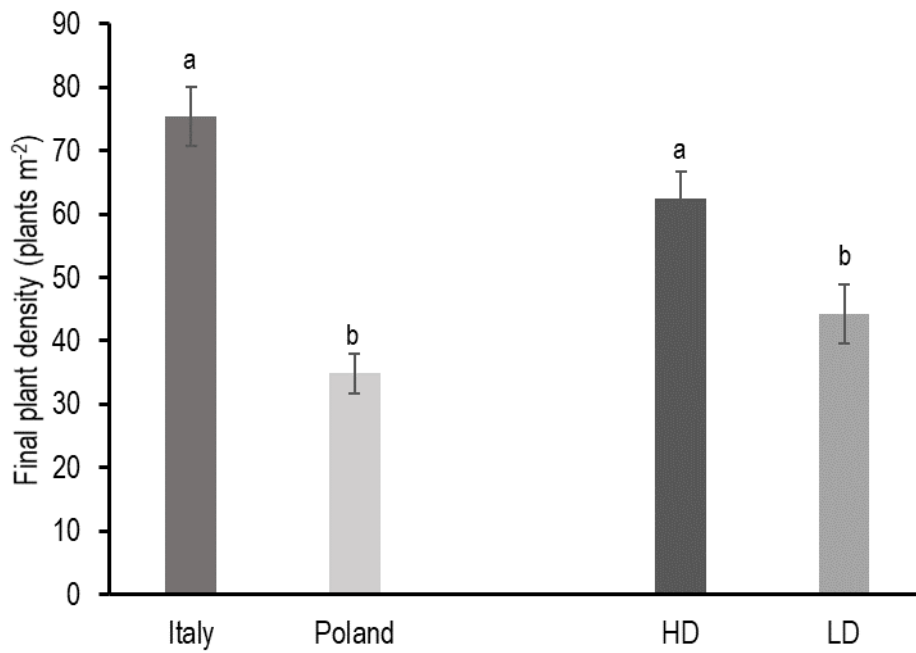
487

488 Figure 2. A: Crambe seed yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the main  
 489 effect seeding rate (HD 220 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> vs. LD 110 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>). Different letters: significant different means for  
 490 P≤0.05 (LSD Fisher's test). B: Crambe seed yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in  
 491 response in response to the interaction between location and sowing date. Vertical bars: standard error.  
 492 Different letters: significant different means for P≤0.05 (LSD's Fisher's test).



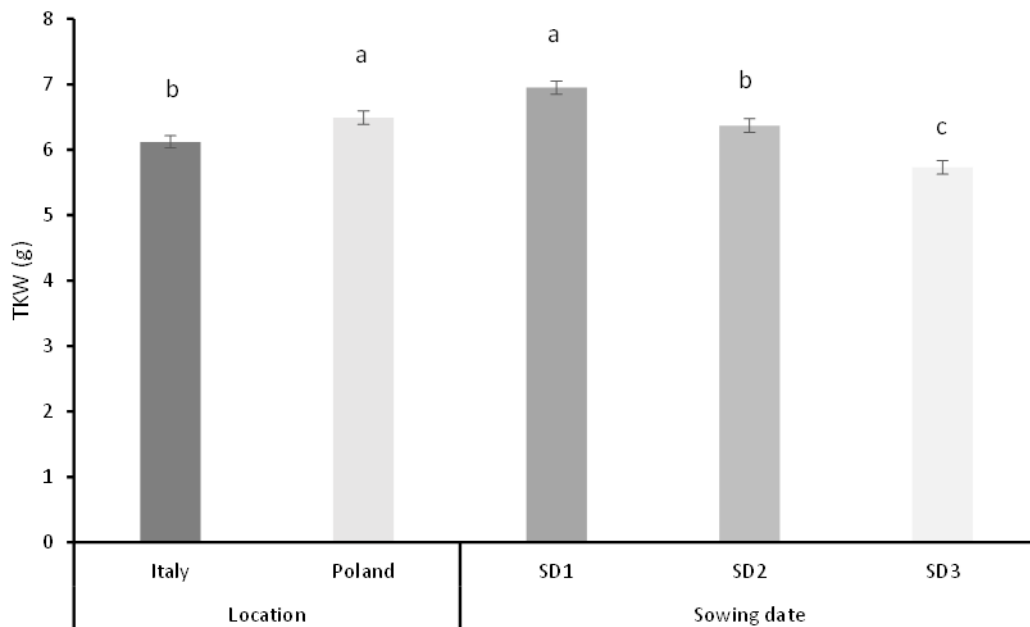
493

494 Figure 3. Final crambe plant density (pp m<sup>-2</sup>) at harvest in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to  
495 the main effects: location (Italy vs. Poland) and seeding rate (HD 220 seeds m<sup>-2</sup> vs. LD 110 seeds m<sup>-2</sup>). Vertical  
496 bars: standard error. Different letters: significant different means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD Fisher's test) within the same  
497 main effect.  
498



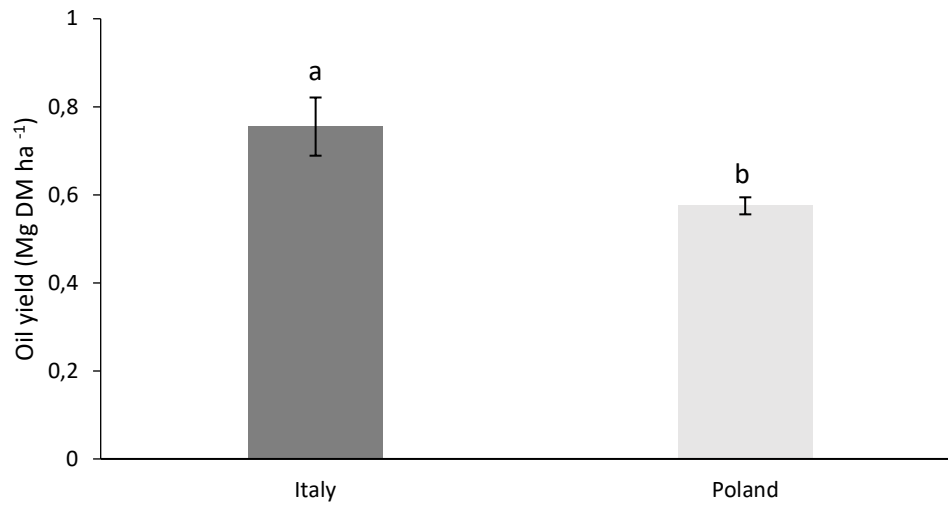
499

500 Figure 4. Crambe thousand seed weight (TKW, g) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the  
501 main effects: location (Italy vs. Poland) and sowing date (SD1 vs. SD2 vs. SD3). Vertical bars: standard error.  
502 Different letters: significant different means for  $P \leq 0.05$  (LSD Fisher's test) within the same main effect.



503

504 Figure 5. Crambe oil yield (Mg DM ha<sup>-1</sup>) in the multi-location and multi-year trial in response to the main effect:  
505 location (Italy vs. Poland). Vertical bars: standard error. Different letters: significant different means for  $P \leq 0.05$   
506 (LSD Fisher's test).



507

508

509 Figure 6. Significant linear regressions between crambe final plant density, plant height, TKW, and oil yield and  
510 meteorological variables for data from Italy and Poland.  $r^2$ = Coefficient of determination. \*\* = significant for  
511  $P \leq 0.01$ .

