

Grass can become a firm ally again by taking a practical approach

Forage – friend or foe?



Spring has never been so eagerly awaited by producers. Excessive rain in 2012 meant that many were unable to graze grass after first-cut silage was taken. A herd manager and a nutritionist share how they plan to make the most of the elusive 'green gold' this season.

text **Allison Matthews**

As we approach spring our memories of previous years are of housed cows, grass that is too strong to graze and forage harvesters or round balers out in the field to get things under control. Summer 2012 was no different, except that grass never seemed to get out of control. Growth figures for 2012 show that some units grew 20% less grass due to the weather and this drop in performance also applied to nitrogen levels.

Spring weather brings with it an air of confidence as the potential to improve profitability is there for the taking, according to Thompsons' nutritionist James Black. "Grazed spring grass has the potential to improve milk yield and quality in many stale autumn calving cows. It can also sustain between four and six more litres from forage even if cows are not grazed for the full day.

"All these benefits mean that, for stale cows, if grass is available and ground conditions are suitable, producers should make use of grazing as soon as possible."

Many producers are watching the clamp wall rapidly approaching and feed bills increasing as forage stocks dwindle and concentrate levels rise in an attempt to preserve what silage is left. "Grazed grass will offer some respite for cash flows as even between four and six kilogrammes of dry matter grazed in three or four hours could replace bought-in feed," explains Mr Black.

Forage pressure

Dunleath Estates' herd manager Leslie Beacom agrees. "We will have to put stale cows out as soon as ground conditions allow as silage is running low.

Table 1: Typical spring grass analysis

item	score
dry matter (%)	20
crude protein (%)	24
metabolisable energy (MJ/kg)	12+



Leslie Beacom: "We will aim to keep cows out this year"

Silage quality for the winter was excellent at 12.3ME, and cows were producing a lot of milk but, as a result, the silo stocks have suffered.

Graze hard

"We also had to house the herd full-time three weeks earlier than usual in 2012 and the high yielders stayed in at night for much of the summer. As a consequence we had to eat into our reserve of forage, which we would usually carry over each year."

Mr Black questions whether producers are making the most of their early spring grass, or if they are grazing it 'hard' enough, in order to leave a low residual or stubble ideal for re-growth.

"This season offers the opportunity to keep grass under close control and to maximise grass production by turning cows out earlier.

"Cows need to go out to adequate cover – around 2,300kgDM/ha – with a slight edge to their appetite.

"Turning cows out onto swards with more cover than this will result in grass wastage. Lower covers will result in excessive poaching," adds Mr Black.

He also points out that an element of flexibility is crucial in the early season. "On days when weather is not favourable, get cows out to eat but bring them back

in before they start pacing the paddock. Cows don't poach when their heads are down."

At Dunleath Estate, Mr Beacom has split the cows into two batches to make grazing more flexible during the early season. "We run two day paddocks with various gateways so that cows can go in one gate and out the other during unfavourable weather.

"Grass will never meet the needs of our high yielding cows but it seems to help



James Black: "Grazed grass offers financial respite for producers"

them. Even last summer with all the wet weather, high yielders still went out every day at some point.

"We find it helps their feet, gives us time to get yards cleaned and bedded, and obviously reduces feed costs, which are excessive this season.

"The low yielders would normally go out day and night with just a buffer provided at milking times. In 2012 they also ended up in at night due to poor weather, but this year we will try to keep them out to let supplies of silage be replenished for the winter period," adds Mr Beacom.

Take action

It is crucial that reliance is not placed on grass silage as too often the easy option is to put a mix down the trough and leave the doors closed. This year any silage that is left must be used for high yielders only and those at the low end of performance should be put out to graze. "Spring grass really is green gold for dairy cows. Do not wait until the grass is blowing in the field – at this stage quality is already starting to deteriorate.

"Get the stale cows out for a few hours as soon as ground conditions allow, reduce winter chores, reduce silage usage and, most importantly, reduce the feed bill," adds Mr Black. |