

Choose grass seeds mixtures with an end purpose in mind to avoid disappointment

Is your grass fit for purpose?

As dairy businesses demand more from their grassland, we spoke to a UK grassland specialist and a leading organic producer to find out more about fine-tune reseeding plans to meet specific objectives and conditions in the field.

text **Sara Gregson**

Maximising pasture growth and utilisation is one of the most positive ways to counter a volatile and falling milk price, and can help producers to be profitable in average income years – not just the ‘good’ ones. So says DLF Trifolium’s Tim Kerridge, adding that producers should also set physical expectations for each field in terms of productivity. “With accurate ways to measure grass growth, it is now easy to pinpoint which fields are performing well and which are past their best.”

When a sward ages production falls, as the sown species are replaced by invasive weed and native grasses. “So it’s vital to prioritise re-seeding if there is more than 50% non-sown species left.”

The energy, yields and higher feed potential of younger modern grass

varieties have also prompted many producers to move to shorter-term rotational grass, which can deliver more milk per hectare.

“The other significant move is away from ‘dual-purpose’ leys,” he says. “Does the paddock need to present animals with an attractive, palatable sward that is easy to bite and chew? Or does it need to produce high tonnages of young leafy material that will turn into high quality conserved feed?”

Silage mixtures

“Each type of grass has its own growth and feed quality characteristics. So, when re-seeding, producers should select the most appropriate combination to meet the aims set for each field and to also fit the soil and climatic conditions.”

Cutting leys should be a mixture of vigorous, ‘upright’ grasses that exhibit rapid regrowth after de-foliation,



Steve Walley keeps a close eye on his leys

such as Italian and hybrid ryegrasses. “Festulolium – crosses between meadow fescue or tall fescue and Italian ryegrass – are attracting a lot of attention due to their ability to withstand climate stresses. Varieties like Lofa are an ideal companion for Italian and hybrid ryegrasses in silage crops,” says Tim.

Where producers are looking to increase the protein content of conserved forage, adding red clover is a good option. “It also acts as an excellent soil conditioner, with the deep legume roots keeping an open soil structure and also fixing nitrogen.

“With grazing leys the main aim is to maintain sward density, particularly on difficult land that may be on heavy soil prone to poaching.

“Late-heading perennial ryegrasses have delayed stem formation, large leaf area and prostrate growth and are ideal for grazing,” says Tim. “Look for those with the greatest resistance to fungal diseases,





A cocksfoot seedling, among the clover and perennial ryegrass, in the bespoke grass-seed mixture sown in August 2014

fields, from peat to clay to sand. Rainfall averages 600mm.

The cows are loose housed during the winter and the composted farmyard manure is spread during late winter onto the grazing ground. Slurry from winter heifer housing is spread onto silage aftermaths.

Extended grazing

The cows are turned out to graze during the day from early March and stay out until the beginning of November. They are fed a buffer TMR based on grass silage, with added straights on the shoulders of the season, and fed concentrates according to yield in the parlour.

Steve measures the paddocks with a platometer every week during the grazing season, so he knows exactly which fields are performing and which are the next candidates for reseeding. The grazing rotation varies between 18 and 28 days and the cows go in at a cover of 2,500kg DM/ha and come out at 1,800kg DM/ha.

Cutting leys produce between 10 and 12tDM/ha from three cuts, taken at the beginning of June, August and late September. Areas cut for silage are seeded using a mixture of hybrid and intermediate perennial ryegrasses, large-leaved white clover and 7.5kg/ha of red clover.

This produces high protein and high fibre forage, while fixing nitrogen in the soil and improving soil structure. The grazing leys rely heavily on late perennial ryegrasses, such as Pastour, Polim and Dolina Timothy – all organic varieties bred by DLF Trifolium – plus three types of white clover. The red clover gets going in early spring and the white comes into its own later in the summer. The Timothy is particularly suited to wetter fields.

Reseeding checklist

- Target poor performing fields
- Test soil for nutrients and structure
- Any regular problems, such as flooding?
- Purpose – cutting, grazing or both?
- How long does it need to last?
- Which species?
- Which type of perennial ryegrass?
- Other useful species, such as festulolium, cocksfoot
- Which type of clover?
- Talk to specialist merchant/agronomist and scrutinise their mixtures
- Check varieties are on the Recommended Grass and Clover Lists

such as Drechslera and crown rust, that can decimate swards later in the season. “And take as much time choosing grass mixtures as choosing bulls to serve the cows – it is just as important and could pay greater dividends.”

Grass-based system

Steve Walley farms in partnership with his father David at Fernyleas Farm, in Prees in Shropshire. They run 300 pedigree Holstein Friesian cows on 170 hectares on organic, grass-based system. The cows calve all year round, yielding 7,500 litres off two tonnes of concentrate, with 3,000 litres coming from forage.

The entire unit is down to a range of grass and clover leys, with around 20 hectares reseeded annually in the autumn.

The home farm is a flat block of land that lends itself easily to dividing into grazing paddocks, with sleeper tracks providing good access. Soil type varies, even within

In areas where drought is more of a problem, Steve worked with local grass seed specialist, Oliver Seeds’ Donald Boyd, to develop a bespoke mixture for cutting and grazing. This includes intermediate and hybrid perennial ryegrasses, red clover and some white clover and 7.5kg/ha of Donata cocksfoot. This has a soft, palatable leaf. He drilled 22 hectares at the end of August 2014.

It established well and a late cut of silage was taken in November. “Grass is at the centre of our business,” says Steve. “We have a lot of animals to feed, so we have to ensure that we grow enough grass, at the right quality, to get us through each year.

“By measuring the grass I know exactly what each field is delivering and what its limits are in terms of soil type and weed burden. While I roughly know the kind of grasses I would expect to sow, I don’t know the exact varieties, which is why I work with an expert like Donald to fine-tune the mixtures to precisely suit our needs.” |

