

Award-winning columnist and Shropshire-based producer Roger Evans shares his ideas on how to help eke out forage supplies this winter, but he's also prepared for things to go a little awry.

Forage plans

We only look to get 6,000 litres from our cross-bred cows and every year we try to produce a larger proportion of that from grass and forage.

Like everyone else, we didn't have the best of starts this year and our cows went out to grass a month later than usual.

Eventually, when we did get them out, the grass grew at a phenomenal rate. But in no time at all, along came the drought.

There was soon no point in measuring grass covers, because there wasn't any grass. A plate meter that measured 'minus' would have been handy.

We had a brown farm for weeks, but we had grass two miles away. It was, therefore, fortunate that we equipped ourselves for zero grazing in 2017.

We would have liked to buy a purpose-built zero grazing machine but chose a cheaper option. We bought a second-hand forage wagon and use that in conjunction with the mower we already have.

Most days throughout the drought our cows had fresh leafy grass to eat. It's an extra job, I know, but opening the clamp and feeding next winter's silage is not without its drawbacks either.

The biggest downside, and the most annoying, is that it is no longer 'safe' to leave a mower in a field around here. We used to take the wagon, park it, put the mower on and cut enough grass, and take the grass home.

Now we have to take the mower, cut some grass, take the mower home then take the wagon and fetch the grass. This puts an hour on the job, but we do still have the mower. If I had to say we have got something right lately it would be the flexibility that zero grazing gives us, considering how and where we farm.

As I write this, in early October, we are yet to take our third cut of silage – we should have about 40 hectares to cut. I know we are taking a chance, but it is still growing.

We are still feeling our way into organic farming, but the one thing that we do know is that the very last thing you need to do is to run out of fodder.

If you do, you need to find some organic fodder and it will probably be expensive. And there's a fair chance it won't be 'handy' and, therefore, also expensive to move. That is why we are prepared to go for as much bulk as we can with this final cut of the season.

As well as the area ear marked for silage, we have eight hectares that has already been cut twice. But I think we will zero graze that and bring a load a day home to the cows, so that, as they move to their winter diet, they will have fresh grass every day to 'stretch out' the silage.

After that we could mow some ground that we reseeded after the drought. We've zero grazed it once and there's some nice leafy regrowth. It's on a high, dry, hill and so, with luck, we could be feeding fresh grass until Christmas. At least that's the plan, but we all know what happens to the best laid plans.

