

Make sure you 'catch the worm' this grazing season – get your girls out as early as possible

The early bird...

With cows already out in parts of the UK – and others bellowing at the shed door for their first taste of freedom as turn out draws near – here's how to make this one of your best grazing seasons ever. And success, it seems, depends on how you manage the sward early in the season.

text Rachael Porter

Many producers waste a lot of their grass – half of it in some cases if figures from Moorepark in Ireland are to be believed. Using the TEAGASC grassland calculator, which allows producers to work out how much grass was grown and used on their unit, case studies have shown that utilisation of grazed grass and silage varies from an average of 6tDM/ha to 12tDM/ha. Quite a difference and a real spur for producers to get to grips with grazing and pasture management and ensure that their cows are producing more milk from grass – and not high-cost concentrates.

DairyCo's Piers Badnell says that the start of the grazing season – now - is the time to take action. "It's all about grazing the grass as early as possible, in other words at the three-leaf stage,

and grazing it hard enough to leave a low residual or stubble for good regrowth."

At the three-leaf stage, a typical late spring sward will offer maximum quality and quantity, yielding between 2,700 and 2,800kgDM/ha. And even in February, some producers could be looking at around 2,300kgDM/ha – well worth grazing.

He adds that a rising plate meter can really help here. This give a precise picture of exactly how much grass is available and this should help producers to use it more efficiently.

"Get the cows to graze hard – to about 5cm or 1,500kgDM/ha. A good rule of thumb is to throw a golf ball into the field. If you can see it then the height is about right. If you can't, you need to graze harder," says Mr Badnell.

Starting the season like this sets the

sward up for a good, productive season. "It's all about producing good residual cover or stubble from which a re-growth of top quality grass can grow.

"The three-leaf stage is crucial – it's when the grass is at its best. So you need to plan a rotation that means that the cows are grazing each field or paddock at that stage of growth and that they're stocked densely enough to graze it back down to the residual level."

Early window

Mr Badnell says that many producers miss this early window and, therefore, don't get the grazing season off to the best start.

"There are three main reasons for this. The first is that many producers don't actually know the quality of their grazed grass. Managed right and the sward ME can be 12MJ/kgDM from January to December. But when questioned many don't believe that the quality is there and put the ME closer to nine or 10MJ/kgDM.

"Another excuse for not turning out early is quantity – they don't think that there's enough grass there to graze. And they may well be right if they're looking to turn the cows out for a whole day. But why not turn out for just a morning for a few days? They could take 5kgDM in four or five hours and that's 5kgDM that you're not having to buy in," explains Mr Badnell.

"It also helps to get the grass growing. The more you graze it, the more it will grow."

The final excuse producers give for not grazing in early spring is that their land is too heavy and wet. "Every producer I meet tells me that they farm on clay, but they don't – it's a misnomer.



Early bite: grazing in late February could be the key to reducing grass waste, and boosting sward productivity, on some units

truth is that with a good infrastructure and careful management it is possible to maximise the use of good quality early season grazing."

And he agrees with Mr Badnell that early turnout is key to maintaining grass quality throughout the season.

"Tracks will reduce the risk of poaching and having different entrances and exits to each paddock to spread the traffic, particularly on heavy fields, will be a big help. The benefits of early turnout will outweigh the small amount of poaching and fields will have recovered by the next grazing round."

He also urges producers to review paddock and grazing platform size. "In many cases paddock sizes established for the normal grazing season will be too large for the short grazing days suited to early seasons grazing.

"So use temporary fencing to split the paddocks and aim for to graze one or two paddocks per day. So long as cows spend no more than 24 hours on a specific paddock then no permanent damage will be done.

"Problems with poaching arise when cows spend more than one day on a paddock."

Complement grazing

Mr Cato adds that some producers are concerned about whether cows will consume enough grass if only turned out initially for short periods.

He says this is not a problem if cows are turned out to correct covers straight after milking – when they are hungry and keen to graze.

"Buffer feeding will be essential in some cases to ensure adequate total intakes. Calculate how much, if any, buffer needs to be fed based on available grass covers and what the costs and benefits are.

"If you do feed a buffer then it must complement grazing and be higher in energy with sufficient fibre to offset the low fibre and highly fermentable nature of spring grazing."

Finally he believes that many producers fail to get the best from grazing because they switch to a lower quality cake when the cows go out.

"Turnout is seen as a chance to cut the price per tonne on the assumption that quality feeds are not required at grass.

"It is important to remember that every kilogramme of concentrate dry matter you feed will typically reduce grazing intake by 0.5kgDM, so it is important to make sure that the cake you are feeding is high in energy," he adds. |

Take pride in your pasture

A 10% weed infestation will result in a 10% reduction in forage yield. That's all that DowAgroSciences' David Roberts has to say to most producers to convince them that it really is time they tackled their dock, thistle or nettle problems.

But it's not for the faint hearted. Spray control programmes for significant infestations need to run for three years or more and must then be followed up with spot treatments to keep the nuisance weeds away.

"The good news is that we've now

got the chemistry right. If you apply the spray at the correct dose rate, in sufficient water volume, to plants at the correct 'rosette' growth stage and during their active growing phase then you will make a difference," says Mr Roberts.

He recommends Doxstar when tackling docks and says that producers are just weeks away from being able to get on and spray. Some areas in the southwest may already be seeing active growth, which is required so that the herbicide can be taken up by the plant and moved down into the roots.

"If your dock problem is relatively small,

don't wait until it gets bigger. Literally nip it in the bud and get a knap sack sprayer. Grazon 90 is ideal for this job.

Controlling weeds is key to reducing waste



"They're nervous about poaching, but they needn't always be. The best way to find out if the land really is too wet is to go and walk it. And most of the producers that I go and do this with in February and March are pleasantly surprised that the land is drier than they thought it would be. So get out there and take a proper look, particularly this year with the drought conditions in some regions."

He admits that gateways can pose poaching problems early in the season and he suggests investing in cow tracks. "To help you justify the cost, work out how much it costs you to house each cow for a day and how many days

you can knock off this by extending the grazing season. I worked it out at between 70p and £1.70 per cow on a typical unit – your costs will probably be within this band."

And think about the profit you could make too. Making better use of early grazing can have a big impact on your business' bottom line, according to Promar consultant Tomos Cato, and he too believes that there are several steps that producers can take to improve early season grazing efficiency.

"Many producers have a view that grazing wastage in early season is inevitable and that turning out too early will reduce future grass production. The