

Be prepared to spray grassland docks earlier than usual this year

Weed out the yield zappers

The relatively mild winter, coupled with wet conditions, has encouraged early weed growth in many grass fields. But the good news is that this presents an ideal opportunity to spray to control them and maximise both your grazing and silage ley potential.

text **Sara Gregson**

Soils on many dairy units across the UK have warmer than usual this winter and this means that grass has continued to grow, albeit slowly, but so, too, have pernicious perennial broad-leaved weeds including docks. These weeds in particular prefer loamy or clay soils that are rich in nitrogen and phosphorus.

They flower from June onwards, producing 60,000 viable seeds per plant, and these spread via wind, water, farmyard manure, in hay, on implements or the coats of animals and through the digestive tracts of the cattle that eat them.

The seed persists in the soil for up to 80 years, so a flush of new docks will always be seen on recently disturbed or poached ground. A cow hoof-print created in damp weather, for example, provides the perfect pocket of soil for dock seeds to germinate. And where

there has been flooding, weed seed may have travelled in from elsewhere to infest previously clean swards.

Unwanted competition

Leafy docks compete with productive grasses for space, light and nutrients. They are less digestible and less palatable than grass and will pull down silage feed values if ensiled. Their stiff stalks can also puncture the plastic wrap on any silage that is baled, letting in air and creating waste. So if docks make up more than 5% of the surface area of a field, treating them with herbicide will be cost-effective. "As the days begin to lengthen soil temperatures are unlikely to go down – even if we have a very late spring," says Dow AgroSciences' grassland agronomy manager Brent Gibbon. "So I expect there will be opportunities, certainly in the southern half of the UK, to spray from the end of March."

There are several advantages to treating patches of docks, with a grass-safe product, early in the season. Having a clean sward gives grass the best chance of colonising the bare patches left by the dying weeds and the field can produce to its yield potential. Achieving good control early on also means that the field can be weed-free for the whole season ahead – the job is done and out of the way.

If spraying with a translocated herbicide specifically for use against docks, such as DoxstarPro, it is best to leave at least three weeks after application before cutting the grass crop for silage. This allows the herbicide time to move from the dock leaves and down into the roots, to kill the entire plant – not just the leafy top. Leaving the spray date until the middle of April or later creates pressure on the silage-cutting deadline.

Follow fertiliser

"The key to success is to spray weeds that are actively growing and forming a rosette of between 15cm and 20cm across or high," advises Mr Gibbon. "This will ensure the maximum amount of active ingredients enter the plant and travel around it and down to the roots."

Spraying grassland with herbicide either a week before or a week after a nitrogen fertiliser application can boost its effectiveness. This is common practice

Tackle weeds: dock-infested silage will have a lower feed value





Brent Gibbon: "There will be an opportunity to spray from late March"

in Germany when applied to cereal crops and Mr Gibbon suggests that UK grassland producers could also benefit.

"Modern translocated products travel to the growing points of the weeds. If the weeds are growing more quickly, following a dose of fertiliser for example, the effect of the herbicide will be enhanced," he says.

Chickweed has also thrived during the milder winter and is romping away in open leys. Buttercups, another early perennial weed that's often found in grazing paddocks, are slightly toxic when growing but rarely eaten unless there are large populations or grazing is tight. But they can dominate large patches of grass. Chickweed can be controlled with DoxstarPro and buttercups need spraying before they flower. Walking the fields is important to identify areas where they are growing in their vegetative state. If

Buttercup invasion: this weed can dominate large areas of grassland



New legislation: both spraying equipment and operators must ensure that they meet the latest test standards

they are growing on grazing land then treatment with a herbicide, such as Forefront T, is the way to go.

New rules

Producers using professional pesticides must now adhere to new EU legal requirements under the Sustainable Use Directive. Spray operators must hold recognised spray certificates such as PA1, PA2 and PA6, or a new certificate aimed at holders of 'Grandfather Rights' – people who were born before December 31 1964, and previously needed no certification.

PA1 is the base module for all spray operators. PA2 covers tractor-mounted and self-propelled boom sprayers. PA6 is required for pesticides applied by hand-held equipment, such as knapsacks. Producers not wishing to take these tests need to employ a neighbour or contractor

who has the qualification. Producers without certification can still buy herbicides, but they must make sure the intended spray operator is suitably qualified, or will be working under the direct supervision of someone who is.

And from November 26 this year pesticide spray application equipment must hold a valid National Sprayer Testing Scheme (NSTS) certificate. Exact test requirements depend on the age and type of machinery. "For grassland producers, who only apply sprays occasionally, it may be a chance to review whether to get the sprayer tested or to use a contractor," says Mr Gibbon.

"Pesticides are an investment so it makes sense to apply them through a well-maintained sprayer. This will achieve the best economical response from the products, while minimising any risk to the environment or spray operator." |