

Focus on grass production provides foundations for high yields

# Planning for forage success

Producing high quality forage plays a crucial role in herd performance, but thorough planning is essential to achieve the best results. And some support always helps too.

text **James Marshall**

**W**ith the continuing backdrop of low milk prices, a committed approach to growing quality forage and producing the best silage will help producers maximise milk from forage while also maintaining good milk yields. “With low milk prices, producers can’t afford to make the wrong decisions on forage,” explains ForFarmers’ forage development manager Jim Abbott. “Producers need to assess everything – from reseeding strategy, to slurry analysis results – to make sure that they have the right plans in place and are achieving the best forage growth and quality possible.”

To help producers with their forage growth plans, the company now operates a nutrient management programme to offer guidance on fertiliser inputs,

planting rotations and seed selection, as well as carrying out soil, slurry and silage analysis.

For one Dorset-based producer this support has enabled him to consistently produce high quality forage, and help maintain strong herd performance.

## Supporting producers

Max Frampton runs a 600-cow herd, based at Holly Farm in Owermoigne near Dorchester, achieving average yields of 11,300 litres. A Danish SAC robotic system was recently installed on the unit and 300 of the higher yielding cows are milked automatically, with the remaining 100 milkers going through a 24:24 herringbone parlour. Cows are fed a mix of 60:40 maize/grass silage, straw, a bespoke blend and

minerals through the feed wagon, topped up with protein concentrates via the robots and out-of-parlour feeders.

As a key element of this ration, supplies of high quality forage play a crucial role in maintaining good herd performance. “A huge amount of effort has gone in to developing his herd and I need to make sure that forage sources are adding as much value to the operation as possible,” explains Jim. “A lot of the success that Max is now seeing with yields is thanks to the work put into improving forage quality.”

During the past five years, Jim and ForFarmers’ business manager Peter

Table 1: Dry NIR testing carried out by ForFarmers on February 18, 2016

	grass silage – Holly Farm
DM (g/kg)	313
ME (MJ/kg)	11.9
crude protein (g/kg)	121
MELK* (unit)	1,130
ruminant index (unit)	139

\* More Energy for the Lactating Cow: total energy available for milk production and maintenance



Max Frampton: "I work closely with advisers to maximise forage quality"

Cade, have worked closely with Max to ensure that forage and feed quality remain as high as possible.

### Nutrient planning

To ensure that leys are performing at their best, preparation and assessment work is carried out throughout the year. This includes soil, slurry and silage analysis.

Jim meets with Max every autumn and uses this information to formulate forage-growing strategy for the coming year. Detailed fertiliser programmes are also produced for the unit, covering specific cropping areas.

"If you want to get quality out of your land, then you have to put quality into the soil," says Jim. "Fertilisers are a cost effective option at the moment for improving forage and producers

can achieve some really good returns – particularly from young leys.

"As well as plenty of FYM, one of the key inputs that I have pushed is sulphur. It improves the quality of grass, results in better protein content and aids digestibility; all the things needed to help fuel cow performance," he adds.

### Soil variation

Holly Farm's leys vary dramatically in composition, from sandy heathland with low pH levels, to areas of chalk. Each poses a set of unique challenges when trying to grow the best forage.

"There is a 16-hectare area surrounding the dairy unit that's used for grass silage and a bit of grazing," explains Jim.

"It is incredibly sandy soil, but after some research I suggested using our graze-and-cut grass seed mix, which includes later and intermediate perennial ryegrasses.

"They perform well in such conditions and will also add a bit of structure to the soil."

Max recently acquired a 122-hectare block of very chalky land and, after Jim analysed the soil and discussed sowing options, a multi-cut red-clover seed mix was planted in late September 2015.

"We hope to get three or four cuts for silage and the clover is a good source of protein for the cows," explains Jim.

"The crop will also lock in plenty of nitrogen, so it's a win-win situation – by planting clover we will reduce

expenditure on nitrogen inputs, soil fertility will be improved and it will produce protein heavy silage."

He was concerned that planting may have been left a bit late, but the crop has performed well in the mild weather and is on track for a first cut in May.

### End result

The proof, though, is in the end result and, based on the silage analysis carried out on the unit by Peter, silages will perform well.

"I carry out dry NIR silage analysis, which provides us with very accurate detail compared to traditional wet NIR analysis," explains Peter. "The quality of grass silage that Max is now producing means that he is on track to meet his goal of achieving 3,500 litres of milk from forage by this time next year. That's a 700-litre increase compared to current values."

Understandably, Max is pleased with the results and the impact that maintaining forage quality is having on his business.

"By working so closely with Jim and Peter, I have the support I need to implement a forage growth plan that works well for my system and consistently produces forage that supports the high nutritional demands of my cows," he says.

"With good forage plans in place, I feel like I have laid a strong foundation on which to further improve the business in the future." |

Red-clover seed mixture: this reseed established well, despite difficult wet winter weather

