

Clover 'nitrogen fix' is essential to boost organic ley productivity

Mixing and fixing

Reseeding leys to maximise milk from forage is key to the growing success of one Cornwall-based organic herd. We spoke to the new entrants, who recently took on their tenancy, to find out more.

text **Lauren Goringe**

With a 10-year lease on a Cornwall County Council unit, Daniel and Lauren Rawsthorn are now fully focused on achieving top yields from their pedigree Cloudbreak herd of 50 Holsteins, through a combination of top genetics and high-quality forage. Originally from a Cumbrian farming family, Daniel moved to Cornwall 30 years ago to manage the renowned Summercourt herd. It was while combining part-time farm work with teaching surfing at Watergate Bay that Daniel met his wife, Lauren. When they started a family they decided to refocus on farming and the couple

were eventually awarded a farm tenancy, near Newquay, and moved to the unit with their three young sons in October 2015.

"The farm already had organic status and, although in the past I have tended to work with conventional herds, the only milk contracts available in winter 2015 were organic ones. So it made sense to carry on with this system," explains Daniel.

Proven sires

Initially it was a challenge to find the number, and quality, of organic cows that Daniel and Lauren wanted to make



Daniel and Lauren Rawsthorn with their youngest son, Jacob

up the herd. But the search paid off and today 70% of the herd is pedigree, with an aim to be totally pedigree in just a few years. The herd calves all year round, but is slightly weighted towards autumn because this milk profile better suits their milk buyer.

"I do my own AI and much prefer to buy semen from proven bulls – we are breeding for longevity, rather than PLI, and I can't afford to gamble too much with genomic predictions," says Daniel.

Reseeding challenge: conditions were difficult in June, but rain helped to ensure that yields were reasonable





Clamp management: attention to detail at the face is essential to minimise waste

“We are looking to achieve a minimum of five or six lactations per cow. And I’ve joined the Cornish Holstein Club because I’d really like to get back to showing cows too, one we get to the stage where we have the time.”

The herd is run on a simple system, with the aim of producing a high milk yield from forage. Concentrates are fed in the parlour with cows out grazing as much as possible. “Our aim is to get to a place in the next five years where we are achieving 5,000 litres per cow from forage,” says Daniel. “I feed concentrate to yield and to maintain body condition, and am working hard to ensure that cows are dried off with the right amount of weight on them. With our maiden heifers we aim to just maintain body condition in the run up to calving.”

Reseeding policy

To achieve high quantities of milk from forage, Daniel has already reseeded 70% of the ploughable ground on the farm (around 16 hectares) and plans, initially, to reseed all the leys every three years, rather than the usual five. This is due to an historical problem with docks on the farm, which are difficult to control in an organic system.

ForFarmers’ forage and arable specialist Louise Woolcott recommended a

Topgrass organic mix for Daniel, which included white clover and ryegrass for the fields near the farm and red clover and ryegrass in the fields used for silage. “Being organic, the nitrogen fix that the clover provides is hugely important and it also offers a good source of protein in the diet,” explains Louise. “Daniel sowed the 16 hectares with a pea/barley mix and some vetch undersown with the red clover. The resulting silage in the clamp looks very promising.”

Zero waste

“Reseeding in June, with such dry weather conditions, was a challenge. But we had a few downpours, which ensured a reasonable yield,” Daniel adds.

He takes no chances when making silage and uses an additive. And although he uses contractors to cut and cart, he does all the buck raking and rolling himself. “We use a clear cling-seal on top and then we used extra wide side sheets on the clamp, which actually overlapped on the top, plus a top sheet and nets and then tyres. First- and second-cut are layered evenly across the clamp so that when I feed with the shear grab I can see exactly what I am using. I am aiming for zero waste in the clamp.”

ForFarmers’ account manager Richard Blackie works with the Rawsthorns to

provide nutritional solutions that work well with the high quality forage.

“To complement the grazing at turnout and through to the end of June, we fed a low-protein compound called Natural Organic Red 14. This product contains essential oils that have a number of beneficial effects on grazing cow performance. It stimulates microbial protein synthesis and it increases the quantity of bypass protein. This is particularly useful with early season grazing, when there is usually an excess of protein.

“From July we fed a higher protein concentrate – Natural Organic Red 16 – to complement the grass quality and the herd’s stage of lactation. We will continue to analyse the forages on a regular basis to balance the diet using ForFarmers unique Feed2Milk dairy rationing programme,” explains Richard.

Attention to detail, particularly around grass and breeding, is the key to success for Daniel and Lauren. Even milking times are set to maximise herd potential, with Daniel operating a strict 12-hour schedule – starting milking at 5am and 5pm. This will, they hope, allow a chunk of time in the middle of the day to catch up on some missed surfing sessions. |