

Reseeding and multi-cut silage should increase quality and quantity

Switching back to grass

Increasing milk from forage is the key focus for one Somerset-based producer, who made the bold decision to stop growing maize this year and is revamping his grassland management.

text **James Marshall**

The increasing cost and workload was the reason Clevedon-based producer Rob Cole decided to stop growing forage maize. Instead, in autumn 2016, he decided to redouble efforts to produce more high quality grass silage.

Rob runs a 320-strong Friesian herd at Treble House Farm with help from his three sons: Sam, Robert and Andrew. The unit comprises 1,976 hectares – a mixture of owned and rented land – and the herd, which calves all-year-round, is currently yielding an average of 8,000 litres per cow. Milk is sold to Tesco.

Growing costs

“Maize silage has been a key part of the herd’s diet for many years,” explains

Rob. “But we were finding that the cost of growing maize was going up and, due to poor weather conditions preventing us from harvesting early enough, we were also having to harvest maize and grass silage at the same time. We make all our own silage, so this meant that we had an extremely heavy workload at certain times of the year.”

ForFarmers’ Matthew Green helps to formulate the herd’s ration. Cows were fed a mixture of grass and maize silage in a 40:60 ratio, as well as home-grown fodder beet and a high protein bespoke ForFarmers blend. Individual cows were then ‘topped up’ to yield with Maxima Milk 16, which is a high energy and high starch feed, in the parlour.

“During the winter we aim to feed high yielders 5.3kg of blend, in the ration, and 3.3kg of concentrate in parlour. This provides maintenance plus 30 litres,” says Sam.

“We turn out the low yielders and first-lactation cows as soon as we can in April to make the most of grazing and then buffer feed these cows at a starting rate of 5kg of maize silage, 5kg grass silage and 5kg fodder beet. Again these cows are topped up with concentrate through the parlour.

“The ration will change this year. Maize silage will be replaced by adding more high quality grass silage to the mix. We hope that grass will become the new cornerstone of the herd’s ration.”

Increase productivity

When the Coles decided to move away from forage maize, they knew that they had to increase the productivity of their existing grass leys in order to ensure they could produce enough good quality grass.

“We were aware that we needed to get



nutrient	old ley	new ley
dry matter (g/kg)	252	202
D value	73.7	78.6
crude protein (g/kg)	186	202
sugar (g/kg)	219	220

Table 1: Fresh cut grass analysis at Treble House Farm.

the maximum performance out of our existing leys if we were going to increase our reliance on grass silage,” says Rob. The Coles consulted ForFarmers’ forage specialist Lisa Hambly and together they drew up a reseeding strategy for the unit.

“We are investing in reseeding old leys with a new, high-performance grass seed mixture,” adds Rob.

The first step was to carrying out extensive soil sampling so the Coles knew the mineral status, pH and condition of the soil that they were working with. This allowed them to formulate an input plan accordingly.

Lisa also recommended the company’s TOPGRASS Silogen seed mixture for reseeding. This is a fast growing, short-term grass ley mixture. “And one that would produce the quality and quantity of grass that the Coles were looking for,” she says,

“We are developing a planned programme of reseeding that will cover

a third of the unit’s grass leys every year. While this represents a significant investment, it will enable the Coles to meet their goal of producing more milk from forage.”

Multi-cut silage

The family has also decided to try a multi-cut approach to their silaging, in a bid to increase the overall quality and quantity of silage yields.

“We always looked to take three cuts,” says Rob. “And some years we would take a fourth cut, but it could be very wet. In 2017, we are hoping to get at least four cuts and push for a fifth from the new leys.”

First-cut silage was taken much earlier than usual this year and the plan is to take a fresh cut from the reseeded leys every four weeks, if conditions and grass covers allow.

“We took the first cut from the newly reseeded leys in the first week of May, which is far earlier than we usually do. But grass growth was good,” explains Rob. “The reseeded leys have responded really well to nitrogen inputs – much more than our older pastures. And our clamps are already full of with early cut grass.”

Sam is also pleased with the results so far: “While we won’t know whether our decision has paid off until we are feeding



Sam Cole: “I hope that grass will become the cornerstone of the herd’s ration”



Rob Cole: “We have been working hard to improve the performance of grass leys”

the grass silage in the winter, things look promising.

“We want to get as much milk from grass and forage as we can. The more we can rely on grass, the less we have to rely on inputs and the better we will be able to handle volatility in the future.” |

