

Shropshire-based producer and award-winning columnist Roger Evans shares his tip on controlling docks in organic swards.

Keep on **cutting**

Organic farming is a bit like a balance sheet – there are pluses and minuses. On the plus side we like it, and it's nice to do something you like. None of us know where we will be after Brexit, but there used to be a lot of talk about support for farming if it delivered 'public good'. I'm not sure how you define 'public good', but I feel that being organic is a good place to be. It fits in nicely with sustainability – another word that is much loved by politicians.

When we first went organic we reseeded some fields that had been in an arable rotation. We put in clover leys and these took really well and I'm not afraid to show them to anyone. When the clover is in flower you can see the flowers from miles away and they are a source of pride. Then there are the minuses – and these largely consist of weeds. There is no one else close by who is farming organically, but that doesn't stop the farmers and tractor drivers in the pub giving advice and passing comment. They were particularly taken by the very fine crop of dandelions that we grew in the spring.

I particularly remember telling someone three years ago that we were thinking of going organic. And they said that if you are thinking of going organic you should spray every field with Round Up. This hardly seemed in the spirit of things, but I can see what they meant.

We've got thistles and nettles in the fields we graze, but we always have had. I must have sprayed them dozens of times with a knapsack, but still they come back. I put the topper over them before they become too unsightly and the landlord or the agent passes comment. By far the biggest problem weed that we have is docks. The clover leys are clean, but there are three fields of permanent pasture that have more docks than I would like.

To maintain cow numbers we started zero grazing some of our away ground. We would have liked to buy one of those purpose-built zero grazing machines, but we couldn't afford it. So we bought a second-hand forage wagon and we mow a bit of grass and then we pick it up. We 'zero graze' the fields with the most docks in it. This is as near as we can get to giving them a hard time and it's starting to show. The last thing you want is for the docks to go to seed, so we tend to cut the grass before that happens. And it seems that they don't like it. If the autumn remains dry enough, they will be cut seven or eight times. They don't look as vigorous as they did. They will get the same treatment again. They were there when we first took on that land and there could be countless dormant seeds in the soil. But it's best not to think about that.

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