

Take a break **with b**

Brassicas can help to plug the ‘fallow’ gap, eke out forage stocks, and take the pressure off grazing in a difficult season. Could they be your next flexible friend?

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Kale, forage rape or brassica hybrids not only provide a break crop, or an alternative to an autumn reseed, but they also provide a welcome fresh bite of forage to ease the pressure on summer grazing. And it’s also an invaluable crop for outwintering cattle – particularly if forage stocks are tight. It is this flexibility that makes this easy-to-grow, palatable and nutritious crop increasingly attractive to UK producers. “It offers producers choice and widens their options,” says Shropshire-based Spunhill’s agronomist Bryn Thomas. “It serves as a good break crop, for those wanting to ‘rotate’ rather than reseed in the autumn. And, because these brassica crops are fast growing, they can also be added to a rotation relatively quickly, in the grazing season or for outwintering stock, to extend forage supplies.”

Brassica benefits: cattle can graze fast-growing hybrid crops from late summer through to the following spring

He adds that alternative forage crops, including hybrid brassicas or stubble turnips, are also a great way to tackle pests and diseases, particularly for producers with frit fly and leatherjacket problems.

“These crops are also deep rooted, which helps in dry conditions and aerates the soil. And, because they’re grazed by cows, nutrients are returned to the soil, this can help to add organic matter and boost soil fertility, particularly on light land.”

Perfect fit

One of his Shropshire-based customers has added a hybrid brassica to the rotation – and ration – on his dairy unit. “This producer has grown a kale hybrid as a break crop for the past two years, typically following maize or a short-term grass ley reseed, to outwinter dry cows and young stock,” says Mr Thomas. “Not only does this save on forage stocks and bedding, but it also helps to reduce his labour requirement and takes pressure off farm buildings during the winter months.” The break crop used was Limagrain UK’s rape kale hybrid Unicorn. “It fit perfectly into the farm’s rotation. Instead of reseeding or replacing some worn-out grass leys with one-year autumn-sown grass ley, the brassica crop was sown in summer as a break in the grass rotation and can then be followed with maize in the spring.



brassicas

“It plugs the winter gap and provides a fresh forage for the out-wintered stock.”

Alternatively, the brassica crop can be followed with a grass reseed – the break in the grass rotation offers some control of frit fly and weeds. And this is also why another Shropshire-based producer has added a hybrid brassica to his crop rotation.

Patrick Gilman’s family has grown stubble turnips for the past 20 years to boost forage supplies and provide a high feed value crop for outwintering dry cow and bulling heifers.

Five years ago they switched to growing a hybrid stubble turnip x kale variety. “We felt that this reduced the risk of growing a break crop. Stubble turnips can be at risk from frost and the hybrid stubble turnip and kale stands up better to harsh weather conditions.”

Rotational system

Patrick runs a 160-cow herd, plus 200 followers, near Ellesmere, on an all-year-round calving system. It’s different in that the 50 highest yielders are milked through a robot and the remaining 100-strong mid-to-low group is milked, twice a day, through a tradition 12-aside swing-over parlour.

“We made the change two years ago and it means that the higher yielders are milked at least three times – if not more – a day,” explains Patrick. Average milk stands at 8,500 litres, at 4.4% butterfat and 3.4% protein. That’s up from around 7,800 litres in 2019 with no additional inputs, just more frequent milking. The robotically milked cows are housed and fed a TMR comprising grass and maize silage, which provides maintenance plus 25 litres. Individual cows are then topped up to yield, through the robots, with an 18% protein concentrate.

The rest of the herd is grazed, day and night, during the summer on the 153-hectare unit. Patrick operates a rotational system for the 121-hectares of grassland at turnout and by early May switches to strip grazing to maximise forage utilisation. He also grows 16 hectares of maize and 16 hectares of barley, which is followed by the stubble turnip hybrid.

“The rotation is barley, brassica, maize and then back to barley,” he says. “The hybrid brassica is an excellent break crop in the rotation, helping us to tackle problematic pests and weeds. And it also means that the land isn’t fallow after barley and through the winter before we drill maize.”

Most importantly, it also provides a useful outwintering forage crop for his cattle. “Sown in early August, it’s ready for strip grazing by beef cattle and bulling heifers by early December. This helps to take the pressure off winter housing but it’s also a relatively low-cost home-grown winter feed. And the cattle love it – it’s very palatable and they do well on it.”

He’s grown Limagrains stubble turnip and forage rape



Martin Titley:

“Modern varieties can certainly offer the feed value required by dairy herds”

hybrids in the past and this year Bryn is encouraging Patrick to use the new variety called Unicorn, due to its high dry matter and energy content. Patrick adds that growing a hybrid brassica is also good for applying slurry on his light land. The crop benefits from farmyard manure or a slurry application pre sowing.

“It is the best cover crop for our unit. We can spread slurry, establish a crop, and quickly stabilise the soil before the winter.”

Brassica popularity

“There are high performing brassicas to suit different systems,” says Limagrains UK’s Martin Titley. “Two were introduced to the UK in 2019 and are proving very popular. “Unicorn is a fast-growing rape kale hybrid with outstanding results from UK trials, making it ideal to sow in the summer or autumn.” Energy values of 11.2 MJ/kg DM, producing 49,500MJ/ha, and a dry matter content of 12.4% were recorded in trials with Unicorn carried out at Limagrains UK’s Lincolnshire site in 2018.

The second newcomer, Skyfall Hybrid summer brassica (HSB), produced between 30 and 35 tonnes/ha of palatable soft-leaved forage in crops sown in July in UK trials. “Skyfall is unique,” adds Mr Titley. “If it’s sown early, by early May, it can be grazed and closed up for regrowth before a second grazing period later in the season. And its deep narrow roots allow it to thrive in drier soil. It can ‘bounce back’ and provide a second grazing crop.”

Brassicas can come into their own in dairy systems.

“Modern varieties can now certainly offer the feed value and their growing and feeding flexibility makes them worth considering – either as a break crop or to increase grazing availability and bolster forage stocks in difficult growing seasons.” |

Brassica benefits

- Fast-growing leafy catch crops
- Ready to graze in 12 to 14 weeks
- Flexible sowing dates – May until late August
- Flexible use – summer grazing or over-winter fresh forage
- Rotation benefits – break in crop cycles with pest, disease and, potential, soil fertility benefits
- Improved feed value from modern varieties and hybrids