

# Reap what you sow

Tips on how to 'revive' tired swards to improve forage quality and winter feeding

Inclement weather conditions in the autumn of 2008 and spring of 2009 meant that many producers faced serious home-grown forage shortfalls and some purchased silage from neighbouring farms at inflated prices. We spoke to a grassland specialist and a grass breeder to find out what steps producers can take now to revitalise swards and ensure that this is not a recurring issue for winter 2009.

**A**lternative crops, like maize and whole-crop cereals, are a popular choice with producers at the moment, but with a late spring due to poor weather conditions sowing dates for these crops have been delayed. And this may mean that harvesting dates are set back. "So when considering crops for winter forage, producers should not rule out good grass swards," says Barenbrug's grass specialist David Linton. "An Italian ryegrass sward will produce far higher dry matter yield than maize silage," he explains. "And it has the advantage of only being established once in every three years."

Some producers may argue that grass silage has higher harvest costs when spread over a three-cut system compared with just one 'harvest' of maize silage. But in reality, grass silage is being harvested at a time of the year when weather – usually – does permit it. Maize and whole-crop cereals are harvested in September and October and in the past few years the weather has 'broken' and conditions have been far from ideal.

## Grass supply

"Grass silage can be made in favourable conditions and this, therefore, increases the quality and dry matter of the forage," says AFBI grass breeder David Johnston, who is based at Loughgall, Co. Armagh. "There is also the option of longer-term silage mixtures that contain high yielding varieties like Spelga, an intermediate diploid, and Tyrella, a late

diploid, capable of persisting in a sward for between five and seven years. "When averaged out over the extra few years' growth, the amount of forage taken from such mixtures outweighs the extra cost of a perennial ryegrass mixture against that of a mixture made up of Italian ryegrasses," he adds. Following the recent spell of poor weather many producers have said that, due to other priorities like harvest and sowing winter crops, their re-seeding programme is behind schedule by at least a year and they are facing a shortfall of grass supply for the coming season.

## Tetraploid ryegrass

Mr Linton explores the options available to them. "Many swards can be revived with new perennial ryegrass varieties by using methods like grass-stitching or simply over seeding with a fertiliser broadcaster. Over seeding is something that can be done throughout the year and, at this time of year, immediately after stock have grazed a ley or just after a cut of silage has been taken. "When choosing grass mixtures for over-seeding producers must first decide what aspect of the existing sward they wish to replenish. If a sward has become depleted and open then a variety like Glen, an intermediate heading perennial with a dense growing habit, is a good choice to help 'thicken' the sward and reduce further damage by poaching. "Tetraploid ryegrass varieties are a good choice for over seeding swards as they



David Johnston (left) and David Linton

can boost the performance of the sward in terms of quality and yield quite easily," he explains.

"The seed size of a tetraploid variety is well suited to over seeding as it tends to stay to the surface of the soil and not get lost or buried like other smaller seeds. Dunluce, an intermediate tetraploid variety, or Delphin, a late tetraploid variety, are ideal choices for over seeding silage swards with their high yield under silage management."

"Another tetraploid well worth considering is Dunloy, a late heading variety. With excellent yield under both silage and grazing management coupled with its exceptional sward density for a tetraploid, Dunloy is a good choice for over seeding either grazing or silage swards," adds Mr Johnston.

## Better response

Over seeding swards may only be a short term solution to the problem of damaged or tired swards of grass. A complete re-seed is possibly a more desirable long-term solution. Not only will it provide better quality grass with higher yields, but it will also produce a sward that will be more responsive to nitrogen and, therefore, produce more grass for less money.

"A complete re-seed may seem like an expensive job but with so many companion crop options available fields need not be out of rotation for so long," says Mr Linton.

"Many producers sow cereals along with

Whether over seeding or re-seeding, producers have options available to improve winter forage



re-seeds to give the new grass crop cover to get established and to give them an initial crop for silage. There are, however, less expensive options available.

"Sowing a Westerwold ryegrass, like BarTempo, at a rate of 5kg per hectare along with the grass mixture can

significantly increase the initial yield of the crop. This ryegrass will yield up to 50% more than perennial ryegrasses in the first summer of production. The new grass crop gets established properly but the producer will not lose out on production from that particular field.

"So, when considering winter fodder options, remember that grass is still the least expensive solution."

Allison Matthews