

From my earliest days, I have been fortunate to witness the seasonal cycle of Sainfoin; from the spectacular spring flush when the fields are painted with a sea of pink flowers, humming with insects, to the contented flocks of sheep and herds of cows grazing on the aftermath, right into the late autumn.

In the southern counties of Britain, there is a wild native form of Sainfoin, which is more prostrate and has a longer flowering period than the farmed type. Cultivated Sainfoin was introduced into England from France in 1651, but this was part of a long chain of progression from the eastern Mediterranean area. Much like early cereal crops, it was selected for the most desirable characteristics and the seed hand harvested.

Over the years in Britain, several different landrace varieties developed, each with its own characteristics and uniquely adapted for the area in which it was grown. Our own variety, Hampshire Common Sainfoin has been grown at Cholderton since 1730.

Sainfoin has extraordinary palatability for all types of stock. Animals voluntary intake is 15 to 30 % more than grass. It is rich in a tannin which prevents bloat and also preserves its protein as it travels through the digestive system resulting in a 50% greater availability compared to Lucerne. Lambs will put on 1lb a day when grazing on it. Sainfoin has nearly 4 times the fine roots of Lucerne, is very resilient and drought tolerant and has the ability to extract non-soluble phosphates from the soil.

Sainfoin is not difficult to establish provided the basic principles are adhered to. It should be under sown with Spring Barley and mixed with relatively uncompetitive grasses like Meadow Fescue, Red Fescue and Timothy. I sow 66lbs of Sainfoin with 12lbs of grass seed per acre. No weed control is necessary other than a quick grazing with sheep when the new crop comes through the stubble in the autumn. This will remove competitive annual weeds. It is best managed on a paddock type system and will maintain high productivity for at least a decade.

Spring growth commences early in the year and in March grazing can be possible. I usually allow the crop to flower and then take it for silage or hay followed by grazing. Last year we cut an excellent autumnal crop of high protein and palatability for silage.

The cultivation of Sainfoin has faded away with the loss of mixed farming and the hegemony of the arable sector. But today we are confronted by new challenges; how do we reverse the decline of biodiversity, the dependency on polluting artificial fertilisers and agrichemicals and correct declining soil health, structure and fertility?

Increased cultivation of Sainfoin will provide part of the solution, no crop is more attractive to bees and other insects, no crop is more palatable to livestock. It gives excellent yields without recourse to nitrogenous fertilisers on the poorest, thinnest, alkaline soils. It will grow out of solid Limestone rock. To quote the anonymous author of the Farmers Calendar published in 1801 'limestone and chalky earths are its favourites. Long as this valuable grass has been known in England, it is a stupidity, stupidity almost miraculous, that there should exist such a number of cultivators of poor, shallow soils, who totally neglect it, notwithstanding it would produce upon the worst of their land 2 tonnes of hay per acre. On fair calculation, they will find very little of their husbandry equal to that in profit.'

Sainfoin is indeed the 'holy hay' of mythology, a panacea for our broken environment and a solution to the predicament of achieving genuinely sustainable and yet profitable production.