

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Lucerne

Another year of compounded challenges. There can be little doubt that climate change is having an escalating effect upon agriculture and the wider environment.

Here there were only four showers of rain between February and the middle of June. Winter oats growing on some fields with thin soil have produced very poor crops. Others, on heavier ground, have done well. All had the same management, but this emphasises the importance of building organic matter and fertility and thereby boosting the moisture retaining qualities of the soil.

Fortunately, last year we had an excellent silage crop and this carried us through the late spring, grazing the meagre grass by day and giving the cows silage at night.

A frost of -7°C in early May stopped all growth, and this compounded by the continued drought meant the prospect of a reasonable silage crop let alone further grazing for the cows, looked remote. This potentially disastrous situation was averted by my mixed cropping policy. Normally I harvest the first cut of lucerne for silage but this year it was strip fed to the cows 7 days a week. For a prolonged period, the cows were fed lucerne day and night. Whereas the grass would not grow, the lucerne was thick and luxuriant. The cows loved it and soon become proficient at ripping the long thick stems from close to the ground. The milk flow and performance of the cows was improved with no adverse health effects.

Lucerne has been cultivated from the dawn of agriculture. It occurs as a wild plant in central Asia. Its qualities must have been recognised and seed collections made, for it was grown by the ancient Greeks, Romans and Persians. Lucerne is very deep rooting, drawing nutrients and moisture from the sub soil and delivering them to the surface. Its decomposing roots add organic matter and nutrients to the soil for the benefit of succeeding crops. It requires no artificial nitrogen because of the action of nitrogen fixing rhizobia attached to its roots. When sowing lucerne it is best to incorporate a grass mixture of meadow fescue and timothy with a pinch of white clover. The grasses benefit from the nitrates emanating from the lucerne as well as filling out the bottom of the sward and thus preventing weed incursion. This ad mixture of grasses and clover gives the cows a more balanced diet and increases the overall yield of the crop.

Lucerne may be under sown with Spring Barley. Arable weeds will not be overly competitive, but in a wet year the lucerne may grow up through the crop. An alternative is to disc the ground after harvest and then sow; this can be done up to early September. In this case though, arable weeds can cover the young lucerne plants, so much so that they can be difficult to find. Light grazing by sheep will remove the weeds and the lucerne will appear soon after the sheep are withdrawn.

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This year the bulk of our silage has been provided by Sainfoin/Grass Leys and a mixture of Oats and Vetches. Without these legumes, our winter feed situation would have been critical. One of the attractions of farming is rising to the many and varied challenges it presents. Global warming has intensified these difficulties. It is only by adopting a diverse range of forages that we, in the organic sector can hope to thrive and prosper.

As I walk slowly up the field, wading through the lucerne that reaches my thighs I am bemused by the mixed colours, pink, white, purple of the lucerne flowers. I am thankful for the bumblebees and butterflies, particularly the Clouded Yellows that are busy around the crop; by the wagtails and meadow pipits that rise before me. The warm humid air is heavy with the languorous scent of stolen honey.

I will be planting a further 60 acres of lucerne this autumn.

Henry Edmunds FRES
August 2017