

ORGANIC GRASS FOCUS

- SEPTEMBER 2007 -

<p>Q.1</p>	<p>I am converting to organic this year and have heard a lot about chicory – should I be growing it?</p>
	<p>Chicory is a high protein crop with a deep tap root and a good mineral content. It is ideal for finishing lambs or as a component of a sward. However, Chicory is not a legume and does not fix nitrogen like red and white clover. It also does not ensile well and needs careful management to keep it at the optimum growth stage for grazing livestock. In the first year of conversion the priority for the grassland must be to establish and develop good quality clover based leys which will be key to the organic system working effectively. Check the grassland carefully for clover content and clover 'health' - white clover depends on a good network of stolon just above the soil surface. These stolon need to be extensive and thick to support good clover growth through the year and especially in early spring - a time when new converts tend to miss the 'bag N'! Red clover, a different plant altogether, depends on its growing point, the crown, for survival so caring for this by avoiding overgrazing by sheep or poaching by cattle will ensure several years of high quality production from red clover leys.</p>
<p>Q.2</p>	<p>Is it too late to do a grass clover re-seed now?</p>
	<p>Answer: Yes. Reseeding now risks very poor establishment especially for the clover in the mix. It is essential for clover to be well developed in order to survive over winter and give early spring growth. Seed is expensive and cultivation can be costly so plan now for a spring re-seed checking that soil indexes are appropriate (pH 6; P and K: 2). It also gives a chance to separate the lime and P or K applications if they are needed for a ley. Consider a short term option like an Italian ryegrass or Westerworlds if a quick growing forage is needed for the winter, spring or for ground cover to protect soils.</p>
<p>Q.3</p>	<p>I am cleaning out my cattle shed, where should I put the muck?</p>
	<p>Answer: Although the muck has been left in the shed since last winter, it is unlikely to be friable and fully composted, unless it has been turned at least twice during this period. The key nutrients will be P and K with only a limited amount of nitrogen. Check soil indexes to decide where the P and K are most needed. As a rule of thumb, fresh FYM at 25t/ha (10t/acre) will supply around 15kg N, 50kg P and 180kg K/ha (12, 40, 144 units/acre). If there is a lot of straw in the muck remember that the breakdown process in the soil may lock up both the soil and muck nitrogen, leaving less available to the growing crop.</p> <p><u>There are several options:</u></p> <p>Further storage and composting - ensure that this is well away from watercourses and if on the farmyard, that there is effective capture of any effluent. If in a field, avoid habitat land and areas used in previous years. Store the heap in a windrow shape to encourage run off, or cover if practical. Applying to silage aftermaths or arable crops should have the priority to replace nutrients removed in the crops. Avoid applying to grazing fields in the next few weeks as it will reduce livestock intakes and is an animal health risk.</p> <p>If applying to arable land, aim to incorporate within 6hrs of spreading to maximise nitrogen use. Avoid using high straw content material under autumn sown crops due to nitrogen lock-up problems.</p>



<p>Q.4</p>	<p>My grass is turning orange – what can I do about it?</p> <p>Answer: A combination of warm temperatures and heavy dews have produced the perfect conditions for crown rust, a fungal disease, to develop in swards across Wales. Traditionally it has been more of a problem for Southern England but this year cases are being reported from Anglesey down to Chepstow.</p> <p>The orange crown rust spores only do significant long term damage to grass in extreme cases – but affect grass palatability to livestock.</p> <p>There are two keys to minimise the impacts of crown rust: make sure the grassland has sufficient nutrients to help it contend with its unwelcome ‘guest’. (1) A small application of FYM may help this. (2) Cut or top the grass to remove the food supply for the fungus. Re-growth over the next few weeks should be less affected. If there is sufficient grass to make into silage, ensure the grass is well wilted and use an additive as low grass sugars and the possibility of undesirable bacteria may result in poor fermentation. Both options should be done sooner rather than later to avoid the rust causing long term damage.</p> <p>For a long term control strategy pay attention to the choice of grass varieties sown. There is significant variation in the resistance of different ryegrass varieties to crown rust. The IGER breeding programme has produced a suite of ‘Aber’ ryegrasses that score well for resistance to crown rust (7 or 8 on a scale of 1-9 where 9 is good resistance).</p>
<p>Q.5</p>	<p>My forage rape crop is undersown – I don’t want to graze it yet – will I damage the ley?</p> <p>Answer: Growers are concerned that the timeliness of finishing their lambs off forage crops has been disrupted with the current foot and mouth restrictions on movements and markets but the priority has to be the grass ley. A heavy rape crop will reduce the seedling establishment, particularly clover, if grazing is delayed. If the rape is grazed now soil temperatures will be high enough to allow the ley to grow on and thicken up. By waiting a couple of weeks there is a big risk that soils will be colder and wetter leaving a poor thin reseed that will deteriorate over winter. Treat the rape as a bonus in terms of quality and dry matter intake – not as a bulky crop. Graze it off at no more than 12 inches to protect your ley.</p> <p>If the undersown crop is Italian ryegrass then you can get away with delaying grazing as the grass is a lot more aggressive but the crop still needs to be used at the right time to maximise the benefits of the yield, energy and protein it provides. Palatability and feed quality will be lost if grazing is delayed too long.</p> <p>If you want a heavy crop for finishing lots of lambs don’t undersow it!</p>

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