

# ORGANIC GRASS FOCUS

## - AUGUST 2007 -

Q.1	<b><i>Buying organic feeds this winter will be expensive, how can I reduce my reliance on them?</i></b>
	<p><b>Answer:</b> If planning a reseed this year, following poor silage making conditions, consider growing something of a suitable quality to be a direct replacement for concentrates and/or to extend your grazing season. High quality grass and clover have always been a sound investment as they are the cheapest source of feed available, but using forage brassicas extends the grazing season and continues to supply high quality feed well into the winter. Identify when your shortfall of feed will be and for what class of livestock, and find a forage option to suit. There's still time to sow rape, stubble turnips, turnips and kale before the end of August. For early spring, Italian ryegrass or Westerwolds could be a sensible option and will take up any nitrogen in the soil; however soil fertility will need to be good to achieve a good yield.</p> <p>Sow the crop straight or undersow to a new ley, but remember if undersown, the forage crop seed rate and yield is reduced, in order not to compromise the new ley. Catch crops like 'Swift' which is a hybrid of rape and kale, is very fast growing and winter hardy, with excellent re-growth potential. Its yield can be 10t/DM/ha with and ME of 12.8 and CP of 15-24%. It will cost about £160/ha to establish - much less than 1 tonne of concentrate this winter. Cost per kilogramme of dry matter would be 2p assuming 80% utilization of the crop. Concentrates as a comparison would be in the region of 22-27p. Brassicas have a significant role to play in extending the grazing season and reducing winter feed costs. Other options, if crops are already established, would be to crimp cereals or maize, instead of making a wholecrop and feed a home produced concentrate. Further information on forage options is available on the winter management factsheet WMO2.0.</p>
Q.2	<b><i>I have noticed that in some of my fields, clover is too dominant at the expense of the grasses. How can I get better grass-clover balance?</i></b>
	<p><b>Answer:</b> Clover responds well to summer temperatures and grows well when grass has passed its peak growth by July-August. It also grows strongly under a regime of rest and cutting, so often dominates after a silage cut. Clover dominance this year may be associated with a warm dry early spring which favoured clover growth. Aim to graze hard during the late summer through to winter which should weaken the clover and favour grass growth. Other methods of checking clover growth include using grass harrows to break up stolon or carrying a grass wedge through winter to give grass the competitive edge next spring. Restricting clover growth now should enable the grass content to reach a suitable balance with clover. The swards most at risk are younger leys where the grass has yet to establish fully if the clover has become dominant. Assess the clover in the spring and plan grazing accordingly; adopting 'clover friendly' management where stolon growth is not thick and prevalent or 'clover unfriendly' management, where the clover plant is very well developed. An ideal balance for a clover ley is to aim for 20-30% at the start of the growing season and up to 50-60% in the latter half of the summer to achieve an average over the year of around 30% in terms of ground cover.</p>

Q.3	<p><b>Making silage from a heavy crop in wet conditions has left some of my swards very open – is now a good time to oversow?</b></p>
	<p><b>Answer:</b> Often crucial to the success of oversowing at this time of year, is soil moisture – this year conditions should be perfect. Helping swards to thicken up by introducing some seed is an excellent idea. Without vigorous ryegrass to fill the gaps, an open ley can quickly become dominated by meadow grass, chickweed and creeping grasses like creeping bent not to mention weeds like thistles and docks. Check your soils before spending any money on improvement. Surface compaction or poor soil chemistry will mean that new seeds won't establish. Take care not to smear and cap the soil surface.</p> <p>Use grass harrows to create about 25% bare ground. Broadcast seed and lightly roll to ensure that seed has a good contact with soil. Alternatively use a slot seeder or direct drill. Hybrids and tetraploid ryegrass varieties are most suited to oversowing as they have a large seed and produce fast growing seedlings that can survive a bit of competition. Make sure their heading dates suit your cutting system and oversow at between 7-10kg/acre. Don't apply any nitrogen or muck as this will 'feed' the existing grass to 'outcompete' the seedlings. Operate a graze/rest/graze policy over the next few weeks to keep the sward short but don't overgraze and damage the vulnerable new plants.</p>
Q.4	<p><b>Do I need to lime my grassland and if so what should I use?</b></p>
	<p><b>Answer:</b> Many Welsh soils are naturally short of lime for quality grass production. Liming should be carried out as often as necessary to keep soil pH between 5.8 and 6.2 (peat soils 5.5-5.8). On acid soils, lime is extremely important as it replaces the calcium lost from the soil through leaching and crop uptake. If the soil pH is not correct, other nutrients are less available and the response to nitrogen and other fertilisers is poor. This reduces yield, increases the risk of pollution through 'wasted' fertiliser and costs money.</p> <p>The maximum single application of limestone is 3 tonnes/acre (7t/ha). Soil type affects the rate of loss of lime; sandy soils have a low capacity for holding liming materials and need liming more frequently at lower rates, while heavy soils maintain pH levels more easily. High rainfall and high nitrogen usage increase the rate of loss, but as a rule of thumb about one third of a tonne per acre is lost each year.</p> <p>There are a range of products under many trade names but there are three key points to consider:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Neutralising Value (NV) varies; ground limestone has an NV of 50-55% (A 100kg of ground limestone has the same NV as 50-55kg of pure Calcium Oxide). Burnt lime around 90-100% and others only 40%. This will affect application rate.</li> <li>2. Solubility level- Many quarries no longer grind the limestone to a fine powder. This affects how fast the lime works and also how long it lasts. Some products take years to breakdown and work slowly, whereas others dissolve and work quickly, but are lost from the soil within 18 months.</li> <li>3. Cost - This depends on the first two points. Is it a long-term investment or a quick fix on a short-term tenancy or rented land? Do I need bulk loads or is it a small field 3 miles away from the farm? Check soil magnesium levels (Mg) before using 'MagLime,' even if it is cheaper, as Mg indexes above 3 should be avoided. Products that have other features (eg trace elements, P and K) are very expensive in terms of neutralising value – remember you are paying for the other "benefits". Check with your certification body that the product you plan to use is permitted.</li> </ol>

**If you have an Organic Grass Focus question for GDC - Tel: 01970 823026  
or Email: [heather.mccalman@bbsrc.ac.uk](mailto:heather.mccalman@bbsrc.ac.uk) /**