



Grazing a Multi-Species Sward

Multi-species swards can produce high yields of quality forage when managed correctly with potential for excellent animal performance.

The management guidelines for grazing multi-species swards are similar to grass swards with quality directly related to the proportion of leaf and stem. However, there are a couple of important points to remember when grazing multi-species swards.

- Rotational grazing will lead to better sward quality, utilisation, and persistence than continuous set stocking
- Providing animals access to paddocks for a short time (1 – 3 days) will help maintain sward diversity by preventing the selective- and over-grazing of more palatable herb species
- It is important to provide a sufficient rest period for multi-species swards to recover from grazing. Allowing 21 – 28 days between grazing will improve persistence without reducing forage quality
- The greatest benefits of multi-species swards compared to ryegrass swards occur in summer when grass swards are less productive



Silage and a Multi-Species Sward

Multi-species swards are often thought as better suited to grazing than silage production. While this may be the case, Teagasc studies have found multi-species swards to ensile equally as well as grass swards.

The following tips will help to successfully ensile your multi-species sward:

- Cut the crop to a stubble height of 6-8cm.
- Multi-species swards typically have a lower DM content than grass swards due to the presence of legumes and herbs. Therefore, the crop must be cut in dry conditions.
- Allow the crop to wilt for 24 to 48 hours in dry conditions.
 - Aim for a DM concentration of 25-35%.
- Care must be taken when mowing and handling the crop to reduce leaf shatter
 - Avoid using a conditioner mower
 - Avoid overwilting and excessive handling
- Silage additive application may also improve preservation.



Nitrogen Fertiliser Application

One of the biggest attractions of multi-species swards is their potential to reduce the requirement for nitrogen (N) fertiliser.

Many studies have reported multi-species swards receiving little or no N achieving similar yields to grass swards receiving ~300kg N/ha per year.

Achieving such an outcome on-farm will depend on maintaining a decent proportion (20-30%) of legumes in the sward. Regular grazing will help to encourage and maintain clover in the sward.

Large applications of N will have a negative effect on legume persistence; however, a small amount in spring can be useful to feed grass and herb species before legumes begin N fixation in summer.

In this case, up to 50kg N/ha early in the growing season should not have a significant adverse effect on legume persistence.



Persistence

Persistence is often highlighted as a weakness of multi-species swards with a chance of the herb content significantly reducing after 3 or 4 years.

If you plan to sow a multi-species sward, then you must acknowledge that it is different to a grass-only sward and thus may not persist in the same way.

This perceived weakness should not be an obstacle as the savings in fertiliser, diesel and time accumulated over the lifetime of a multi-species sward will far outweigh the cost of oversowing plantain and chicory every few years.

As we saw in the case of Kevin O'Hanlon, oversowing clover and herbs is possible and once established the savings in N can be substantial.

At worst you will be left with a grass-clover sward and a much smaller fertiliser bill!

Multi-Species Swards



Choosing the right mixture

Multi-species swards are often thought only suitable for good quality, dry land. However, by selecting species that can better cope with wet or dry conditions, we can formulate different mixtures to suit different soil types.

A good starting point is a mixture of species that will perform on a range of soil types like perennial ryegrass, white clover and ribwort plantain. Once we have this foundation, the mixture can be tailored towards dry or wet soils.

In particularly light, dry soils, adding species like festulolium, cocksfoot, lucerne and chicory will help keep the sward productive during prolonged dry periods.

On the other hand, in heavy, wet soils, species like timothy, meadow fescue and plantain are well equipped to cope with such challenging conditions.

A mixture like DLF's 6 Species Herbal Ley is an excellent all-round mixture that should produce large amounts of quality forage across a range of soil types.

For more information on selecting the right mixture for your farm, call Thomas Moloney, DLF 087 396 1265

DLF HERBAL LAY 6-SPECIES

GRAZING

FEATURES

- Offers vitamin and mineral intakes sometimes absent from grass alone
- Trials show higher live weight gains and significant reduction in the number of faecal parasitic egg counts
- Increased production in drought periods due to deep rooting nature
- Inclusion of red and white clover increases palatability and reduces N requirement

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|-----|--------------|---------------------------------|
| 15% | Nifty | Intermediate Perennial Ryegrass |
| 20% | Kerry | (T) Late Perennial Ryegrass |
| 20% | Aspect | (T) Late Perennial Ryegrass |
| 10% | Timothy | Timothy Blend |
| 10% | Chicory | |
| 10% | Plantain | |
| 7% | Red Clover | |
| 8% | White Clover | |

Six species mixtures are currently being trialled by UCD with very positive preliminary results in terms of weight gain and reduction in worm count.

This mixture contains six species, with Ryegrass species providing the yield and quality to the sward, while Chicory and Plantain add vitamins and minerals which are sometimes devoid in grass.

Clover is also included at a high rate to ensure more palatable grazing and boost weight gain.

AVAILABLE IN 12KG PACKS

Research References

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