

Redstart reducing costs in Roscommon

This mix of forage rape and kale is a viable alternative to concentrates for sheep

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Concentrates represent a large proportion of variable costs for lamb finishers. Sheep farmers are seeking alternatives, such as alternative forage crops, to reduce the costs of finishing lambs.

One such example is Roscommon sheep farmer Niall Byrne. Niall's farm is situated in Brideswell, in the south of the county, and is typical of farms in the area with dry, free-draining loam soils. Niall runs a 200-ewe midseason lambing flock along with 25 spring-calving suckler cows and a beef-finishing enterprise.

"In recent years, I have been incorporating small amounts of the forage crop, Redstart, into my system for finishing lambs," says Niall. "The advantage of growing Redstart is that the seed is relatively inexpensive and the regrowths are available for feeding ewes after the lambs have been finished."

Redstart is a hybrid brassica: a mix of a forage rape (which supplies rapid growth) and kale (which provides winter hardiness). To date, Niall says his experience has been very positive with improved lamb growth rates and kill-out percentages.



James Kelly (left) and Niall Byrne in a crop of Redstart.

Establishment and sowing

In 2018, Niall has sown 5ha of Redstart. Dry plots and those lands most in need of reseeded were selected. Plots were sprayed off with glyphosphate. Conventional cultivation methods of ploughing, power harrowing and discing were used to establish a fine, firm seedbed. Seed was incorporated at 4kg per acre. He expects a yield of 6t to 8t of DM/ha. Fertiliser usage included three 50kg bags of 10-10-20 with lime being applied to target pH of 6.5.

Grazing management

"Immediately after sowing, we divided the Redstart into five temporary divisions with electric fencing to allow for a rotational grazing system," says Niall. "This maximises utilisation and minimises waste of the crop."

Grazing is expected to begin in late July, which is approximately at the six- to eight-week growth stage. Three grazings is the target for this crop with chemical nitrogen being applied after each grazing.

Niall emphasises the importance of not overgrazing and damaging the

stem at any time as this greatly reduces the regrowth potential of the crop. Any of the crop not used for finishing lambs will be used for outwintering ewes.

Livestock management

Redstart is a forage brassica and is by nature low in iodine. Lambs destined for this crop for finishing will be administered an iodine bolus. They will be slowly introduced to the crop to avoid digestive upsets. Initially, lambs will be given one to two hours' access with this increased to full access at seven to 10 days. Fresh water and hay is made available to the lambs during grazing. The crop has the potential to finish 25 to 30 lambs per acre.

Niall is part of a recently established regional sheep joint programme between Teagasc Roscommon/Longford and local lamb processor Kepak Athleague. An open evening covering all aspects of the establishment and management of this crop of Redstart will take place on his farm on Tuesday 13 August at 6pm. All are welcome to attend.

Key messages

- The high-yielding hybrid brassica Redstart offers farmers an option to address the challenges of forage shortages and high-concentrate finishing costs.
- If sown early, the option for multiple grazing between August and February can be achieved.
- Care is needed in the grazing management of the crop to avoid digestive upsets.