

Alternative Forages, something to consider on Sheep Farms?

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Over the last number of years, farmers have had to deal with a vast array of weather conditions and given the extra costs that this has involved, the use of alternative crops maybe worth considering on some farms. These crops maybe viewed as a means of reducing the length of the housing period, reducing potential feed deficits and all the associated costs (silage, meal and straw) or as part of a farm reseeding programme.

Forage crops such as Tyfon and Forage Rape can provide cheap, nutrient dense feeds for sheep. The leaves of root crops are generally high in protein while the roots themselves are high in energy. These crops are fast growing and are increasingly being used by farmers as a cheaper means of feeding sheep over the winter. There are some considerations to be noted while growing these crops. Introduce sheep gradually to these crops and ensure adequate access to fibrous roughage such as hay, silage, straw or permanent pasture so as to minimise intake issues. The rule of thumb when feeding forage crops is to ensure that the diet is made up of 70% forage crop and 30% fibrous roughage. Strip grazing feeding forage crops is the most common way of feeding these crops so as to minimise waste. These crops are generally low in trace elements such as Selenium, Iodine, Copper and Cobalt so access to high quality minerals or bolus's are necessary to avoid any potential problems. Speak to your Vet for advice.

As with any crop being sown, knowing the fertility of your soil is imperative so the correct fertiliser type and rates to be used to ensure the success of the crop. Below is the guideline fertiliser application for soils at P and K Index 3 and Nitrogen Index 2. A split fertiliser dressing for Forage Rape is advised. Spread half of the chemical Nitrogen at sowing and the remaining half of the Nitrogen approximately 3 weeks later.

Forage Crop	Sowing Dates	Sowing Rate	Fertiliser Requirements * N P K /ha	Utilised
Forage Rape	Mid May- Mid August	6.5kg/ha	120kg/ha N + 20kg/ha P, 50kg/ha K + Boron	10 -12weeks
Tyfon	April to September	6.5kg/ha	130kg/ha N + 30kg/ha P, 170kg/ha K	10-12weeks

*Assumes soil index 3 for P & K, N Index 2. (Teagasc, 2015)

Tyfon is a leafy type of stubble turnip hybrid (stubble turnip X Chinese cabbage) that has become popular among sheep farmers. It is a fast growing crop that is high in energy, protein and is easily digested by the animal.

As they say timing is everything and if you have a mid-season lambing flock, the ideal sowing date should aim to have the crop ready to graze at weaning time. Generally, the initial grazing can take place anywhere from six to twelve weeks after sowing. Tyfon can be sown as a pure stand or undersown as part of a grass reseed. If sown early in the season it is possible to achieve a number of grazings. Care should be taken not to overgraze it as if the crown on the plant is damaged, regrowth's can be poor.

There are some considerations to note with the use of Tyfon. As aforementioned, there is a limit of 70% inclusion in the diet, with the remaining 30% being made up of hay, silage, straw or access to permanent pasture. Lambs on Tyfon need a good-quality high Iodine mineral drench or bolus.

Where sown as part of a reseed, a post-emergence spray cannot be used to control weeds, as this will kill the Tyfon. However, the reseed can be sprayed the following spring when the Tyfon has been grazed out and is no longer present in the sward.

Research shows that one acre of Tyfon should finish about 25-35 lambs. Tyfon can deliver weight gains of 300grams per day at a time of the year when thrive off grass is reduced. Small light lambs do not thrive as well while heavier lambs can be finished on Tyfon so it is recommended that lambs be a minimum of 30kg plus before being let out to graze the crop. Good grazing management is critical to achieve these gains and it is important to match the stocking rate with the areas being grazed so that the tyfon does not become either overgrown or scarce.

Forage Rape is an excellent brassica forage crop and is grown due to its ease of production and utilisation as an extra winter feed. It can be sown later in the season so can offer more flexibility than other crops without a reduction in yield. Rape grows quickly and has good regrowth potential where the grazing is tightly managed.

This crop has extremely digestible stems which allowing complete use of the whole plant with minimal waste. It provides high energy and protein for grazing sheep and is ideally suited to autumn/winter grazing and for out wintering. The crop is most commonly grown to be grazed on site. It can also be zero grazed and used in the winter diet. There can be a yield difference of up to 30% in crops sown in early August to those sown in late August. The crop can be ready to utilise 10-12 weeks after sowing. As with any crop grown, it is important that all cross compliance measures are adhered to.