

Red clover a winner on suckler farms

Red clover for silage is being established on four farms in the Future Beef Programme for the first time this year. It is not a new crop to Ireland, so why is it increasing in popularity now?

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Swards containing red clover have the capacity to 'fix' over 200kg of N/ha and can yield over 15t DM/ha, without receiving any chemical (bagged) nitrogen. Research from Teagasc Grange also shows that animal intakes are higher on red clover silage than with grass silage, which should result in higher animal performance. These positives make the crop financially and environmentally attractive to farmers.

However, a red clover silage crop is not right for every farm, nor every field. It is generally unsuitable for grazing, has poor persistence of just three to four years and requires a four-year break between crops.

Also, it can be difficult to ensile if weather conditions are not suitable!

James Skehan in Ballynevin, Co Clare, has sowed a crop on his farm this year. "I wanted to produce better-quality silage for my weanlings over winter," says James. "The field hadn't been reseeded since 2007 and a lot of weeds were starting to take over.

"I had visited Teagasc Solohead and another Future Beef farmer and saw red clover working on those farms. I decided I would try it. The field I chose is 6.2 acres, an out block that is already in a three-cut silage system. I aim to graze it in the spring, but in this system I won't have to, which is an added bonus."

The field is one of James's drier fields and the soil pH is 6.8, which is on the right side of the target of 6.5. It is in index 3 for phosphorus, but only index 2 for potassium (K) so James is working hard to build K by spreading farmyard manure and slurry.



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Continued on p20



Continued from p19

James says he will spread no chemical nitrogen on the field. He will spread a minimum of 2,000 gallons of slurry per acre and one bag of 0-7-30/acre for each cut to ensure the soil fertility is maintained and to replace the silage offtakes.

“The crop was sown in late May after grass silage was harvested. The mix contained two red clover varieties (Amos and Garant), a white clover variety and perennial ryegrass. I was trying to source red clover seed from the UK recommended list but it was hard to find. Amos is on the list and Garant is not, so I was happy to have at least one proven variety.”

There is no Irish recommended list for red clover varieties available yet.

James says he will be cutting the first crop of silage soon after it starts flowering, which he expects to be in late July.

The Climate Action Plan for Ireland has set a target to reduce chemical nitrogen usage by 30% by 2030. Using red clover as a nitrogen source is one way of helping to achieve this.

“If I can get 38 tonnes of silage from this field it will make up almost 50% of my silage for the winter and I will have produced it with no chemical nitrogen,” adds James.

“In 2021, I spread 123 units of chemical N per acre for two cuts on the same field. This made up 27% of the total nitrogen spread on the whole

farm for the full year. So if I can manage this crop right, I can reduce my chemical nitrogen use by 30%, which will be reducing my GHG emissions, and I think that will be a great achievement.”

Ken Gill, an organic farmer in Clonbullogue, Co Offaly, has been growing red clover farm for over 10 years. “For me the crop does two things: firstly, it provides nitrogen which is there for the following crop of oats. Secondly, it provides a high protein feed which is fed back to the yearlings so they don’t need any extra ration. This is hugely beneficial because organic ration is very expensive.”

While the crop produces its own nitrogen, as stated earlier phosphorus and potassium are very important. For every five tonnes of dry matter removed, 12 units of P and 100 units of K per acre are required. Ken spreads 2,500 gallons of cattle slurry/acre in spring and farmyard manure in autumn to help meet these requirements.

Red clover grows differently to white clover and it has one high growing point so management is a little different. “When you’re mowing it, the really important thing is that you keep the mower up,” says Ken.

“A rule of thumb is that if you put your fist down on the ground, the mower blade should be able to skim over it.

Ken Gill.



“That’s important because of the way the crop grows – if you cut it too low you’ll cut the crop out of it.”

Ken aims to cut the crop three times in the year and mulches a fourth one in October to allow light down into the sward. Last year his first-cut silage test results showed the crop’s dry matter digestibility was 77% with 14.8% crude protein.

Both James and Ken applied for the red clover silage measure when the scheme was open earlier this year. This provides funding of up to €300/ha towards the cost of establishing the crop. To receive payment for it,

James Skehan with his local advisor, Thomas Gleeson, in the newly reseeded red clover field.

the crop type had to be indicated on the 2023 BISS application. The crop must be sown before 15 July, and successfully established by 30 September.

The mixture must include 4kg of red clover for each 12kg bag, with the balance of the seed mixture containing either perennial ryegrass or hybrid ryegrasses and it may contain some white clover.

Claims must be uploaded on Agfood.ie before 31 August 2023 and should include the invoice(s) and one seed label per species mix/batch of seed purchased.

Research is under way in Teagasc Grange to investigate the potential of red clover across Irish beef and dairy systems.

Researchers are examining the crop agronomy in terms of variety evaluation, nitrogen application, dry matter production and persistency, the feeding value and the farm system (ie nitrogen balance, economics, environmental effects and relative feed costs).

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