

Utilising novel crops

A recent meeting of the Avon Meadow Sheep Group looked at opportunities for growing and feeding lucerne, grain maize and a grazing mixture of chicory, white and red clovers and plantain.

The event was held at Mark Candy's 688ha (1,700 acre) farm near Chippenham in Wiltshire, which he runs in partnership with his brother and parents. Mark and his family run 2,200 pedigree Lleyn ewes, of which 100 are kept as a nucleus flock to breed replacement rams. The bottom 10 per cent of ewes lamb in January, so their lambs can be finished early and the ewes culled before the price drops. The rest of the ewes start lambing in early March.

Lucerne

Mark's decision to grow around 13ha (32 acres) of lucerne was driven by his need for protein to feed his ewes while they are housed before lambing.

He established the crop as a mixture of lucerne and tall fescue in September 2013 after spring barley. The first cut was taken on 1 June and the second in early August. One field with lighter soils struggled early on as it was so dry, but Mark hopes it will be more drought-tolerant in its second full year.

Lucerne caused a problem in another field by blocking some of the drains, which caused waterlogging and meant some work was needed to mend the drains.

Grain maize

Mark has rented some ground to consultant and sheep farmer George Drewett to grow grain maize. It was drilled on 20 April and the target date for combining is the end of October, with the intention of selling it to dairy farmers. However, as the grain maize price tracks the wheat price, this is not looking as financially rewarding as previously.

Specialist lamb-finishing paddocks

Mark established three fields, each around 3.6ha (9 acres), with a mixture of chicory, red and white clovers and plantain this spring, for finishing lambs.

He struggled to keep it under control during the summer as it grew rapidly. He topped some for weed control and to maintain quality, and planned to set up a rotation around the three fields with a big group of growing lambs.

He expected the lambs to do very well on this grazing mixture and would be handling them every two weeks to ensure they did not become over-fat.

The group discussed the potential of this crop compared with stubble turnips and wondered if, as it lasts three to four years, it is a more cost-effective way to finish lambs.

They also talked about the possibility of using it for freshly-lambed ewes, especially ewe lambs in the spring, to help them recover and grow while lactating.

It was agreed that more information about its growth potential in the spring is needed before any major system changes were put in place, but it could possibly work well.

Mark emphasised the need for a balance between having enough of the mixture to ensure a rotation could be implemented, but not devoting the entire grazing area to it as growth rates in winter are low and there is a risk of plant damage if it is grazed in wet conditions.

EBLEX has published BRP+ documents on [lucerne](#) and [chicory and plantain](#), as well as a [directory](#) giving information on many other forage crops.



The Avon Meadow Sheep Group runs a discussion group and a lamb marketing group for farmers in Wiltshire. Email [George Drewett](#) for more information.