

## Spring's the time for lucerne

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If you're considering growing lucerne this year, spring is the time for establishment. This is the key message from a recent DairyCo-funded trial\* investigating how lucerne can be grown successfully in Great Britain.

Researchers at Harper Adams University (HAU), Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) and the University of Reading have been investigating the effect of timing and cover crop on the success of lucerne establishment.

### Spring vs Autumn establishment

Over the last three years, there was repeated failure of the lucerne crop planted between late summer and autumn across the three different sites – Dumfries, Shropshire and Reading.

“Lucerne requires higher soil temperatures than grass to grow and, because it is very slow to establish, there is often insufficient time in autumn to get a crop growing before they reduce and growing conditions decrease in winter. It is also less competitive than weeds at this time of year,” said HAU researcher, Louisa Dines.

In contrast, spring planting proved more reliable with successful establishment achieved at all three sites in most years.

### Cover crop

Weed burden is a significant problem at establishment. Spring crops had as much as 70 per cent of the first cut being made up of weeds in some of the trial plots. A cover crop of spring barley, sown at half rate, was trialled to find out whether this could help reduce the weed burden and if it would have any long-term effect on the lucerne crop. But overall, the cover crop had no real effect on first cut dry matter yields. Some sites showed greater yields with a cover crop, while some showed greater yields without across the three year trial.



The use of a cover however, did appear to reduce the amount of weeds at first cut (by almost 40 per cent on some sites). Regardless of this, sowing with a cover crop did not result in any long-term benefit – yields of lucerne at second cut were similar between all plots

“Our results show how important achieving a clean seed bed is for lucerne as it can be heavily hit by weeds at establishment,” said Louisa.

“However, once the initial weed burden has been removed at first cut, it should be greatly reduced.”

*\*This research is part of the DairyCo Grassland, Forage and Soils Research Partnership, led by SRUC in partnership with Harper Adams University and University of Reading.*



For more information on growing and feeding lucerne download the [BRP+ document on growing and feeding lucerne](#) and the [DairyCo booklet](#).