

## Growing lucerne

A group of sheep, beef, dairy and arable farmers attended an event on 9 June, held at Stowell Farm near Chippenham, to learn more about the potential of growing lucerne in the UK climate.

Lucerne expert, Francis Dunne from Field Options, began by commenting that the crop is not for everyone. He explained that a Lucerne crop will last for four to six years and so careful thought must go into planning a rotation.



### Properties of lucerne:

- Consistently delivers 26% protein
- Gives up to four to five cuts per year
- Provides active fibre and structure for a ration
- Boosts DM intakes
- Is drought tolerant
- Grows well on light land
- Yields an average of 12t DM/ha (less in the year of establishment)
- Has no nitrogen (N) requirement
- Can fulfil the greening requirement for BPS
- Is a low energy crop

Whilst the crop has a lot to offer, lucerne is P and K hungry, needs a four-year break and does not like wet ground. Potential growers must consider whether they have the right land, the labour available to grow and conserve it and also whether it will suit their stock's diet.



Lucerne requires a pH of between 6.5 and 8, so it essential to soil test before establishing a crop. As lucerne is a very deep-rooting crop, up to two metres in the third year, therefore seedbed preparation must ensure the pan is broken. The host's crop demonstrated that lucerne roots will veer off at a 90 degree angle if they hit a pan!



The host had drilled tall fescue with Lucerne and bales the crop to feed to his Lleyen sheep. This crop was free of weeds, but it is essential to consider which ‘companion’ crop is used so that it does not compete with the Lucerne at establishment. A pure Lucerne crop will generally outgrow most weeds after the first cut – but not docks. Other potential companion crops are red clover, timothy, cocksfoot, meadow fescue and spring barley – oats are too competitive and winter cereals do not work so well.

Francis informed the group that sowing should be carried out between April and mid August (April is optimal) as the crop is temperature dependant for establishment and needs to flower in the first year. Direct drilling has been done in the USA, but seed depth and moisture are the key factors for success. Seeds should be drilled to 10-20mm and producers should be aware that the crop is autotoxic, i.e. once germinated it will not allow further Lucerne seedlings to grow so you cannot fill in any gaps.

[Read the BRP+ document on Growing and Feeding Lucerne for more information](#)