

Good grass drives Dartmoor Farm forward

When Will Dracup returned to the 96ha (200 acre) family sheep and beef farm in 2008 after doing an apprenticeship at Bicton College, his first challenge was to improve the quality of the in-bye fields, which were full of weeds and low yielding grasses. The sandy, peaty soils are on the acid side and annual rainfall can reach 2100mm (82 inches).

The ewes currently number 350. A strict culling regime for lameness initially reduced flock size, but the aim is to get back up to 500. There is a mixture of breeds, including Whiteface Dartmoors, Suffolk crosses and Highlander ewe lambs. The flock lambs indoors in April to ensure good grass cover at turnout.



Will Dracup

Mr Dracup has recently started using Primera and Abermax rams as meat sires to increase lamb growth rates and carcass traits from a forage-based diet.

New Leys

Taking advice from grassland expert Tony Walkers of Oliver Seeds, Mr Dracup started reseeding around 10ha (25 acres) a year out of 40ha (100 acres) of leys. These provide high quality grazing for weaned lambs in the first year, and are then cut for silage—usually one bulky crop at the start of June, in the following two to three years, followed by aftermath grazing.

“We want to feed just home-grown forage, to keep the costs right down.” Mr Dracup explains.

“The only animals that may see concentrates are ewes carrying twins and any tail-end lambs that are still here in October. To achieve this we have to have nutritious, clean leys.”

Four years ago the fields were infested with broadleaved weeds including docks, thistles and red shank. Reseeding operations and spraying older leys with herbicide have now eliminated most weeds—with odd plants spot-treated as and when they appear.

Fields ear-marked for reseeding are treated with glyphosate before being ploughed and cultivated in early May.

Over the past two years Mr Dracup has sown Megabite, a medium term mixture of intermediate and late perennial ryegrasses, and Timothy, which is good for early spring growth in testing conditions. This is broadcast at 14kg/acre across the field using a Vicon Vari Spreader and then rolled.

The seed germinates quickly and after six weeks 50kg/ha of urea is applied. A week later freshly weaned lambs are turned out, which encourages the grass plants to tiller and produces a dense and hardy sward.



Getting rid of weeds and reseeded is increasing the productivity of Will Dracup's grass up on Dartmoor

Mr Dracup added "The lambs do really well on the leafy, high D-value grass. We weigh all the lambs each week during the summer, so we know that if the average is falling then something is wrong and we need to find out why. Is there a worm burden, or is there something wrong with the feed? I test the dry matter of the grass using a microwave—and if the grass is too wet I may move them onto permanent pasture until it gets drier.

"Last year the lambs sired by the Primera rams grew at 280g/day from weaning to sale just on the new leys, reaching 20kg deadweight and grading at 3H. Some were as young as 13 weeks of age.

"It is not cheap to reseed, costing on average £494/ha (£200/acre) including an application of lime—but with such an increase in production you can't knock it.

"Since we started reseeding we have started finishing lambs three months earlier; plus we're using much less concentrate and making more silage. More importantly, the silage is much higher quality.

"It has also helped us get on top of the dreadful weed problems. Now we may be able to sow longer-term leys and introduce clover to help reduce the amount of fertiliser we use. I am also considering rotational grazing to give us even more grass and to maintain quality for longer over the season.

"Everything has to pay for itself for us to make a profit. We now know that by having the right sheep and managing the swards properly, we can achieve our target animal performance at a much lower cost."

For more information...

Contact:

Rod Bonshor, General Manager, Oliver Seeds
Tel: 01522 706500
Mobile: 07774 249620
Email: rod.bonshor@oliver-seeds.co.uk
Twitter: @RBonshor



The Dracup farm also produces cattle