

Management of breeding bulls

RJ & SE Whitcombe, Hawkley Herd

Robert Whitcombe has a 122 ha mixed organic farm in Hampshire, running herds of pedigree South Devon and Red Angus cattle. The Red Angus herd was founded in 1998, using genetics from Leachman in Montana, USA and has steadily increased to 40 suckler cows. The cows are specifically selected for maternal traits including fertility and milkiness. Robert produces on average ten breeding bulls each year, which are reared on a predominantly forage-based diet.



Cows calve during the spring, between February and March, just before the onset of the grazing season.

Shortly after calving, cows and calves are turned out, where they remain until the calves are weaned between eight and nine months old. Calves rely solely on their dam's milk, receiving no additional creep feed supplementation. Robert says this allows him to select breeding bulls from cows with the best maternal traits. Growth rates for bull calves average around 1.2kg/day from birth to weaning.

At weaning, the best bull calves are selected for breeding and the rest are castrated. Selection is based on conformation and Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) for calving ease and loin thickness. At weaning, calves are introduced to the growing ration. This ration consists mainly of ad libitum red clover silage as well as a 15% protein ration (dry matter (DM)) consisting of home-grown oats, a protein pellet, Seaquim minerals and soya oil. This is introduced at a rate of 1kg/head/day at weaning and is increased to 3.5kg/head/day by the time the bulls reach one year old.



Robert specifically grows around 15 acres of red clover for silage to be fed to the youngstock. He prefers this to traditional grass silage because of its high protein content. Being a legume, the crop has the added benefit of fixing nitrogen (N) from the air. Red clover can fix between 200-300kg N/ha per year compared to about 150kg N/ha per year for white clover. The 2015 red clover silage crop analysed at 44.3% DM and 17.1% crude protein.

Robert also grows 20 acres of oats for the youngstock; choosing to feed this cereal rather than others because of the crop's suitability for his organic system. Oats are moderate in energy and starch and high in fibre but low in protein, making them less suitable for rapid growth. The typical analysis of oats is shown in the table below.

DM	ME	CP	NDF	Oil (AH)	Starch	Sugars
86.0	12.2	11.0	35.6	5.0	42.0	1.0

Typical analysis (% DM or MJ/KG DM for ME)

The majority of breeding bulls are sold privately off the farm at around 14-16 months old. Robert likes to keep them on farm until they are at least 400 days old so that they can be ultrasound scanned. Ultrasound scanning can be a very useful tool for producers to assess the carcass quality of their cattle by measuring muscle and fat depth in the live animal.

Take a look at the Better Returns Programme Manual/Signet publication
[Fit for Purpose Bulls: A blueprint for breeders](#) for more information