

Deferred Grazing

We all know the saying “There’s more than one way to skin a cat”, but whichever method you use and before you even start we need to know whether it is a tabby or a lion.

In this article I want to stimulate you to look at your farm in a different way. I want you to look at your natural assets, which you may have overlooked and to use them to the full.

Before I start talking about grass, I want to talk about the animal that will be utilising this grass. For many years now since the introduction of the brown envelope the cow unfortunately has taken a bit of a back seat. She was already paid for and so was the replacement, therefore all the interest was placed upon her calf as that's where extra money could be made.

For years our forefathers spent a lot of time and effort producing a beef cow that would live off grass and grass alone. She was a low input but quality output member of staff. Any of our native breeds have been bred specifically to utilise grass. Each cow in the herd must produce a viable living calf every 365 days (a calendar year).

If we look at a cow in the wild we would see that her normal life circle would be as follows; firstly she would give birth in the spring as the natural grasses are starting to regrow and her level of nutrition would rise. This will give her the capability not only to feed herself but also to produce valuable milk for the calf. As summer goes on she will start to put on condition, will come back in season and will then be covered by the bull. As early autumn arrives, she will have not only put on a lot of condition but she will have fed the calf well. By this time the calf will be ruminating and digesting natural forage by itself. The calf will be naturally weaned throughout the autumn and early winter months and from here on both the cow and calf will live off what forage is left. The cow will live on this rough fibre and whatever else she can scavenge, as well as using some of the condition she had laid down over the summer. By the time springtime comes round again, this cow will be in good condition to give birth and complete the whole cycle again.

Now it's time to turn to the grass. We should look at what our fathers and grandfathers did before us. They would have little sayings like “turn the cows out and let the grass follow the cows”. A bit of a strange saying or is it? Our fathers realised that short grass had a higher feed value than long grass, so why let your cows wade in tall grass - it's just a waste. There have been a lot of improvements in grass varieties, and in particular clovers, and when considering what mixture to use it is worthwhile knowing what is best for your land for both production and sustainability.

Now we have covered some of the important points from behind the scenes of deferred grazing, I want to tell you about some of the farms I have visited and the different techniques they are using to achieve their goals.

Farm 1 – extended grazing: this farmer has spent a considerable amount of time and effort on improving his soils both in structure and fertility. At the same time that he has been doing this, he has strived to put down a grass seed mixture which would give him 7-10 days earlier grazing at the start of the season and the same at the end. This may not sound like very much but by shortening his winter by two to three weeks he has been able to save on bought in feed and reduced his feed costs by 10-15%.

Farm 2 – no land for silage: this farmer has no real cutting land in which to make silage. You can grow cereals on the sandy river beds but the rest of his ground is too steep. He aims to calf all his heifers at two years old. They will be the first females on the farm to calf so that he can give them all the attention they need. Once calved these animals will be turned out to a 200-acre natural basin. This is sheltered from all prevailing winds and yet gives the animal all that it requires in the way of forage. His cows will calve next and will be turned out into the same field. As the autumn starts to close in the heifers with a first-calf at foot will be weaned and the calves will be left out. In the basin he has a simple feeding system where he can creep the calves and put straw out for the cows. The calves will notice that their mothers have gone but do not suffer any real stress. He will then go through the same procedure with his cows. The calves will be run on until such times that he will take some either straight to market or to a fattening unit.

Farm 3 – utilisation of extensive hill ground: this farmer has quite a lot of land, the majority of it being hill. In a dry summer this hill will burn off but the cows will still manage to rear their calves. In the winter time there will be areas of hill, which for one reason or another will not have been grazed. This then becomes the winter keep for the cows. The rest of its land will burn off every summer so even if he wanted to make silage he couldn't. Whenever I visit this farmer he always tells me that he has been trying to keep everything simple and cost-effective. He also wants to be as self-sufficient as he possibly can.

Farm 4 – no need for silage: this farmer has a very simple system - he winters his cows on the hill and as they get nearer calving he will bring them into fields nearer the farm. These fields are too steep to take silage from yet grow good grass all summer long. The cows will stay here all summer after they have calved and in the autumn the calves will be weaned and taken straight to market while the cows are returned back out to the hill.

Farm 5 – alternative winter crops: this man has decided to follow the growing trend of using kale as the mainstay forage for out wintering his cows. He will supplement this diet with straw or mature bale silage. This then allows him to use what little shed space he has for his weaned calves, which he can sell the following spring. He does not have enough land to carry all the stock through the following year so the majority of his calves will be sold in the spring sales. The kale system works for him as it means that he can reseed a field each year. What he has found is that a kale diet is quite different to a normal grass diet. This initially caused him problems, as the diet was not correctly balanced. With a bit of help, this was soon corrected.

In conclusion what I have tried to highlight is the fact that each and every farm is different and that you should adapt your farming system to suit what your farm is capable of. Everybody will have a different set of circumstances; whether, for example, this is a limitation from land which cannot be utilised for the whole year through lack of water or a site of special scientific interest. We should not be frightened to look at what our forefathers have done and to follow in their footsteps using new technology to give us the edge. It is important to keep things simple and it is important to understand what and why you are doing something and to only change one thing at a time. In other words paying attention to detail.



QUALITY GRAZING ON THE HILL



A DRY SUMMER ON THE HILL

