Cotswold Seeds Ltd
The Cotswold Business Village
Moreton in Marsh,
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First Hand: Bespoke Cholderton Mix & Simple Herbal Ley with Mark Melly



Farm Type: Mixed

Location: North Wessex Downs

Size: 300 acres

Soil Type: Clay & Chalk

Mixes Used: Bespoke Cholderton Mix & Simple Herbal Ley

Mark Melly has used a bespoke Cholderton Mix for many years for early bite and drought resistance, but he has started experimenting with mob-grazed diverse herbal leys in his organic arable rotation to further improve soil health.

His farm is located in the North Wessex Downs AONB, between Andover and Hungerford. Soils are typically clay with flint over chalk going through to chalky loams and valley bottom gravel. All prone to summer drought.

Mark has 300 owned acres in an organic arable rotation, including spelt, winter oats and spring barley with three years of cereals followed by three years grass. Stock includes 400 breeding ewes and 85 suckler cows taking all their offspring through to finishing, so at any time there are 250 head of cattle on the farm.

Mark's bespoke Cholderton Mix has been specially adapted without red clover. 'We don't want red clover in the autumn as we'd not have anywhere to flush the ewes, due to oestrogen issues,' Mark explains.

Instead, there's more medium and large leaved white clover for grazing and cutting. It also includes deep rooted Timothy and cocksfoot for drought resistance.

'Managing cocksfoot can be a challenge,' Mark says. 'The same cocksfoot that gives us the early bite can run to head, but you can't have one without the other and the benefits of early grazing and drought resistance in the summer are critical on this soil type, any compromise in the quality is balanced by the amount of clover in the sward.'

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The Cholderton is grazed with ewes and lambs in spring at a rate of four ewes per acre, then shut up to take a cut of silage, which will provide the bulk of silage to see the cattle through the winter.

Mark says the clover provides good levels of protein and digestibility, the ryegrass and cocksfoot gives good bulk and increases yield. 'We are getting 10.5% ME energy content which is more than enough to fatten cattle with supplementary barley, plus decent protein levels.

Last year, for the first time, Mark experimented with a Simple Herbal Ley, mob stocked and

rotationally grazed. It was established by undersowing into spring barley, a technique Mark describes as being very successful for over thirty years.

A block of twenty acres is divided into four grazing paddocks, with pregnant ewes turned out to lamb in April at a rate of two per acre. With lambs at foot the stocking rate goes up, but there's been more than enough grass. The sheep have not needed any supplementary feed and Mark has had to bring in 100 more to keep on top of the ley. There was still enough grass in one of the paddocks to make extra silage.

'The concept of a diverse ley and mob-stocking being good for soil structure, drought resistance, and fertility building is critical to us,' Mark says. 'The mob-stocking, though it involves management, produces more forage and is the way to go in the future,' Mark says.

Given the success of the herbal leys this year, Mark has undersown another twenty-five acres which will be ready for use next year.

'We are making more use of herbal leys to coincide with options under Countryside Stewardship because going forward, we have to look at other income streams than pure farming. Herbal leys are adaptable and resistant enough to variations in climate and they certainly have a future here.'

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