Cotswold Seeds Ltd
The Cotswold Business Village
Moreton in Marsh,
Gloucestershire GL56 0JQ

First Hand Case Study: Red and White Clover Leys with Tim Peachey

Tim Peachey's father started farming at Donkeywell Farm in 1971, converting to organic in 1992, since then clover leys have played an important role in their farming system.

{video1}

'I rely on the legumes to fix atmospheric nitrogen and build soil fertility, ready for the arable crops in the rotation,' Tim explains.

There are three years of crops - wheat, barley and oats - followed by a two year clover ley, with a third of the farm down to grass and clover mixtures at any one time. Since the clover leys alternate between white clover and red, it's essentially a ten year rotation with the eight year gap between the two clovers avoiding any disease build up, such as sclerotinia.

'Until about 10 years ago, we used to undersow the clover and grass mix into spring barley when the barley crop was at the 3-4 leaf stage,' Tim explains. 'However due to the barley canopy being quite short and open at this point, it let the weeds in and we had problems with thistles, couch and dock seedlings getting established.

'So I decided to try sowing the mix under oats which have a thicker canopy. The time of sowing is critical, I aim to sow when the oats are at the 3-4 leaf stage, if the crop moves past the 5 - 6 leaf stage the canopy begins to close becoming too competitive, reducing the light and space for the clover and grass seedlings and reducing the reliability of establishment .

We go in with a 6 metre shallow tine harrow and spinner, this has the advantage of ripping out any weed seedlings as we go. I will then go in with a flat roll to ensure maximum seed to soil contact and leave the seedbed nice and firm. When we get some rain the clover will germinate and begin to establish under the oats, which then sit there as small plants, kept in check by the cereal until harvest. At harvest the canopy is removed and the clover and grass mix gets away.'

The straw is sold in exchange for mushroom compost or PAS100 (composted green waste) which goes on after the second year of clover ley and is ploughed in prior to the arable cropping.

Livestock also plays a crucial role in the rotation as they utilise the forage and increase the distribution of manure, so Tim runs a flock of five hundred tack sheep for this reason. The ewes are put on white clover a month before they go into tup as oestrogen levels in red clover can cause problems with fertility. From a spring undersowing, by September/October the clover leys can be lightly grazed by the sheep to take the top off and encourage more growth. 'The grazing stresses the plants to encourage tillering and nitrogen fixation, and spreads manure over the field.'

Tim has been working with Cotswold Seeds for twenty years. 'The white clover mixtures are the best I've had and the technical advisors are always very helpful on the phone. I speak to Sam who gives brilliant advice about what we should and shouldn't do and we tweak the mixtures to fit. Their service is the very best and I like their bags too. They are very useful afterwards.'

Donkeywell Farm is on a standard AHA tenancy agreement, under the Ernest Cook Trust at Fairford who Tim says are very encouraging about keeping the generations going. 'I hope one of my children will take the farm on in a few years,' he says.

Date Posted: 7th April 2020