

Soil Farmer of the Year 2020



Congratulations to two of our customers, Jake Freestone, an arable farmer from Gloucestershire and Alex Brewster, a livestock farmer from Perthshire, who have been awarded the 2020 Soil Farmer of the Year as joint winners.

The competition, now in its fifth year, is organised by the Farm Carbon Toolkit and Innovation for Agriculture and is sponsored by the National Trust and Cotswold Seeds.

The competition aims to find farmers and growers who are engaged with and passionate about managing their soils in a way which supports productive agriculture, reduces greenhouse gas emissions and builds soil health, organic matter and carbon.

Jake farms over 2000ha at Overbury estate in Gloucestershire across a range of soil types. Included in the estate are 950 ha of combinable crops, and a flock of 1100 ewes. Jake has been working on soil management since 2015 when he changed his cultivation and has been predominantly no till since then. Jake is using cover crops and grass leys to protect soil and minimise erosion and has changed the rotation to incorporate his sheep onto his arable ground to build fertility. He is using companion cropping and is starting to experiment with biological additions to further stimulate his soil life. He is currently working on reducing nitrogen use and moving the sheep grazing to a paddock grazing system.

Farm Carbon Toolkit said that Jake was chosen as one of the winners this year 'due to his enthusiasm and commitment to manage his soils in a way which is sustainable and resilient, as well as his experience and dedication to sharing information with other farmers and consumers.'

Jake comments "I am absolutely delighted to have been awarded Soil Farmer of the Year 2020. It is a great reward for the whole farm team at Overbury for their enthusiasm and dedication to Regenerative Farming practices and putting at the heart of everything that we do."

Alex farms 1000ha at Rotmell Farm in Perthshire, which is comprised of 130ha of improved pasture and hill ground. Alex has always been interested in farming with the environment but started experimenting with rotational grazing in 2013. The grazing has now morphed into a mob grazing system which has brought about improvements in the soil structure and rooting depth of plants, nutrient availability, pasture utilisation, stock

health and growth rates, and the length of time that the stock are able to graze. Alex is seeing his soils adapt and change, and is now focussed on building more resilience into his system by tackling parasite control in stock and reducing the use of pour ons.

Alex has been chosen as joint winner this year due to the level of innovation, knowledge, passion and hard work that has gone into developing his management system, his continuing desire to learn and adapt and the passion with which he is advocating the importance of resilient grazing livestock systems.

Alex explains “Humanity owns its existence to soil and as agriculturalists we create our existence from it. We are absolutely thrilled to have been awarded Soil Farmer of the Year for 2020, to be recognised for the creative and proactive work that we have been doing to enhance the soils and ecosystems on Rotmell Farm. This fully helps justify that there is a massive relevance to soil management and regenerative grazing through red meat production.”

The accolade of third prize this year was taken by John Martin from Dorset. John farms 320ha across light soils growing a range of combinable crops in an area which is severely protected from a water quality, nitrates and phosphates perspective. John has been working on soil management for the last 35 years and has been innovating both in terms of integrated pest management, cultivation, the use of cover crops, spring cropping and a reduction in fertiliser and plant protection to enhance soil biology. The judges particularly liked his dedication to developing his own skills and knowledge and applying new concepts to his farm as well as his passion for his soils.

John comments “We are delighted to have achieved third place in Soil Farmer of the year and we share this accolade with our colleagues and mentors who have inspired and encouraged us in improving soil biodiversity and sustainability. We look forward to learning more.”

The competition was especially challenging this year due to the movement restrictions brought about by COVID and the top five finalists all submitted videos to the judges showcasing their farms and how they were being managed. The finalists were all interviewed virtually before the decision was made.

David Gardner, FCT director and a judge for this year’s competition said *“This year’s Soil Farmer of the Year entries were outstanding and selecting a winner was difficult. We have appointed joint winners with Alec Brewster representing the grassland sector and Jake Freestone representing the arable sector. Both are real leaders who are experimenting on farm and pushing the boundaries in terms of their soil management. It was a real privilege and pleasure to meet them online and I hope we will be able to visit them for our winners farm walks this autumn.”*

The top three farmers will all receive prizes of Cotswold Seeds fertility building or green manure seed. They will also get an opportunity to showcase their farm management to a wider audience by hosting farm walks which are planned to take place in the autumn (restrictions permitting). More information will be provided on those in due course.

Deborah Crossan, Soil and Water Manager from Innovation for Agriculture commented “Each year we meet passionate and dedicated farmers making changes which invigorate their soil health and inform and inspire our industry.”

‘Cotswold Seeds has been proudly sponsoring the UK Soil Farmer of the Year award since it was launched. Ian Wilkinson, MD of Cotswold Seeds says:

The aim of this competition, to celebrate farmers who are managing their soils in a way that increases organic matter to support productive and healthy crops and pasture, which in turn supports a profitable and resilient farming system, is totally inline with the work of Cotswold Seeds and our new centre for regenerative agriculture at FarmED. Soil health underpins every activity on the farm and many of our seed mixtures, such as herbal leys and cover crops, are designed to improve soil structure and fertility. The soil is a vital natural resource so we’re delighted to be supporting an initiative that encourages farmers to give it the respect it deserves.’

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