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FIRST HAND: Market Garden/Horticulture Mixes with Soil Farmers of the Year

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David Newman and Tracy Russell, from Bucksum at Shabbington Field Farm are the winners of the 2024 Soil Farmer of the Year Award, the first market gardeners to be honoured with the title. Since 2008 they've rented sixteen acres on the 100 acre Shabbington Field Farm, growing produce ranging from baby leaf salad through to root vegetables and warm season crops such as peppers, cucumbers, chillies and melons in polytunnels. Most is sold through the farm shop, open for two half days a week, employing nine young people.

'Our whole system revolves around herbal leys,' explains David. 'The ley is down for three years, feeding the soil and grazed by sheep belonging to a neighbouring farmer. This means we're not using fossil fuels and tractors for topping, and the sheep dung is adding to the soil fertility. At the end of the third year, going into the following spring, we'll graze the ley down quite hard and then plough before going into veg production for one year. The principle of regenerative farming is to ensure the soil is in better health than it was when we started, rather than just depleting or just maintaining it. For us that means not overcropping, so we only take a cash crop for one year out of four.'

There are 11 polytunnels and crops are rotated throughout to maintain soil health.'We also use herbal leys in the tunnels and Cotswold Seeds are helping us trial other different mixes,' says David. 'Initially I was using the Vineyard Fertility Building Mix (annuals like crimson, berseem and persian clovers) and we've also undersown various mixtures including buckwheat, fenugreek, yellow trefoil and clovers to cover the soil and put that extra structure in for the winter months when the broad beans don't cover the whole soil.

Finding a cover crop with good root structure that wouldn't compete with the cash crop is quite a challenge but we're keen to carry on feeding the soil even while we take the cash crop off. 'It's not been the best year because of the slugs but the establishment wasn't too bad.'

David is interested in strip tillage, creating a permanent clover understory with cropping in between. "We're trialling cover crops that are spaced half a metre apart. As weeds grow up between the beds we flame weed before planting. This year I'm going to put winter salad brassicas in between. If it goes well then we will leave the strip tillage crop (clover) and establish another cash crop after the brassicas.'

David and Tracy like to experiment. 'As sponsors of the Soil Farmer of the Year, Cotswold Seeds have given us a budget to buy some seeds and we're using that in between the tunnels to introduce a Beneficial Insect Mix to grow wildflowers and grasses that will encourage predators such as beetles to eat the bugs that are a problem for us The whole approach is about letting nature create balance.

To this end, David and Tracy have also introduced agroforestry, with chickens to clear the ground under the tree lines, while a reservoir, fed from the land around, is used to water the market garden.

It’s great for wildlife too, providing a habitat for waterfowl, kites, curlews and newts, which help to control the slugs.

When it comes to establishing and terminating the crops, David and Tracy cultivate as little as possible. ‘But because we’re not using agrochemicals, it means there have to be a couple of hits with the cultivator or weed burner to knock out any problem weeds. In the poly tunnels where we’re also trialling strip tillage we also added some soil improver. The herbal ley seeds are either broadcast, or ‘if we want to be a bit more precise I’ve converted an old Stanhay precision drill set up to make rows 400mm apart. I’ve also got a multi drill which can do eight rows with about 40 mm spacing,’ says David.

He’s also considering investing in an air seeder. Tracy says it was a wonderful surprise to scoop the Soil Farmer of the Year accolade. ‘It’s so great to see others who are passionate about the soil.’ It’s a passion that the couple share widely, running a kids club and workshops to ‘get people excited about vegetables, plants and food and just get their hands into the earth.’

Vineyard Fertility Building Mix

herbal-leys

Orchard Clover Understory Mixture

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