

Take a fresh look at fodder beet

With the spring months on the horizon, growers and dairy farmers should already be starting to plan their 2024 fodder beet crops. British Dairying reports.

Fodder beet is the highest yielding crop for dry matter and energy, and it is popular among growers who value its reliable performance as a feed for cattle.

Pembrokeshire-based Agrovista agronomist Lyndon Harris has been working with fodder beet growers for more than 11 years and is an advocate for the crop.

"Every dairy farmer that I deal with tells me that when they include fodder beet in their feeding system, milk yields go up," he says.

But, despite the strong economic and agronomic arguments for including fodder beet in rotations, the crop is often overlooked by farmers, says Lyndon.

One reason cited for dismissing fodder beet on arable or mixed farms, is a long harvesting period. Growers are concerned it can't always be followed with an autumn-drilled crop, he suggests.

In truth, 30-40% of existing fodder beet growers harvest a good percentage of their fodder beet early enough to still drill winter wheat, so incorporating fodder beet successfully into existing rotations is readily achievable, Lyndon says.

However, the main block preventing its uptake by a wider grower audience is that it is perceived to be a challenging crop to grow, particularly among grassland farmers with little arable experience.

"This is disappointing to hear because, as with all crops, fodder beet just needs detailed planning to achieve maximum yield potential," he says.



Brunium performed well in trials



Toby Reich, Head of Agricultural Sales for Elsoms Seeds

"The specific focuses are on good seedbed preparation, the right fertiliser and herbicide application advice and, most importantly, selecting the right variety for farming systems," he suggests.

Growing tips

"Because fodder beet seed is small, good seed-to-soil contact is essential. Establishing a fine seedbed and a favourable tilth on the soil surface ensures good contact is made and will also help increase the effectiveness of pre-emergence herbicides on the newly established crop.

"It's also important to recognise that cold, wet conditions don't phase fodder beet. It thrives in areas where there is very high rainfall and can grow in much lower soil temperatures than other arable crops," Lyndon says.

"Drilling too early can be problematic in frost-prone regions. Soil depth isn't a major factor either, given fodder beet doesn't suffer from soil compaction problems as much as other crops, especially maize,"

he says. On crop nutrition, although fodder beet is not particularly nitrogen hungry, it does require a significant amount of potash sourced from slurry or farmyard manure.

A good agronomy tip is to substitute 50% of the potash requirement with agricultural salt.

"When they include fodder beet in feed, milk yields go up."

"Because fodder beet was originally grown in Mediterranean countries in soils with very high salt content, it is one of the few crops that has a salt tolerance."

It absorbs salt very effectively, in the same way other crops would absorb potash, Lyndon explains.

On trace elements, the important one for fodder beet is boron, which can be added to agricultural salt at

little cost. Boron plays a key role in supporting a diverse range of plant functions, including cell wall formation and stability, and is a must for improving potential yields.

Variety selection

"For fodder beet growers, particularly new or first-time growers, good variety selection is critical. First and foremost, decide which variety suits your preferred system, whether its graze in situ, lift to feed or - in the case of an arable farm - lift and store to sell," Lyndon advises.

"If you're grazing then you need a variety with a lot of top visible above the ground. If you're on heavier soils then a smooth-skinned variety with low dirt tare for easier lifting is desirable - and, depending on whether you're lifting earlier or later, good frost tolerance has to be a factor," he says.

He also advises looking for rhizomania-tolerant varieties that produce good top and leaf, which make the plant more resilient to rust and other foliar diseases.

The amount of leaf a plant produces also gives it good frost tolerance, with the leaves acting like a cloak to protect the top.

Smooth-skinned options with low dirt tare make for easier lifting in heavier soils, and a variety with a high percentage of top above the ground can be top lifted, bottom lifted or grazed in situ.

Strong agronomics

Toby Reich is Head of Agricultural Sales at independent breeder Elsoms Seeds, which markets seven fodder beet varieties in the UK.

"Of the varieties on Elsoms' portfolio, Brunium has performed exceptionally well in trials with high yields, improved disease tolerance, low dirt tare and easy lifting characteristics," Toby says.

"Whilst Jamon is still one of our most popular varieties, Lempa - a new, high yielding, rhizomania-tolerant variety with a medium dry matter percentage, has also performed exceptionally well and was the highest yielding variety in recent Elsoms' trials. With a smooth skin, clean lift, and conical shape it provides a high energy feed that suits any farming system."