

Somerset farmer gives up on maize and makes up starch with wholecrop

Somerset dairy farmer, Martin Hoddinott had struggled with maize for many years but when he finally concluded the crop just wasn't suited to his farm, he had to find an alternative.

Milking 270 Holsteins at Barrow Hill Farm in North Wootton near Shepton Mallet, he did not want to compromise the herd's production of 9,200kg at 4.05% fat and 3.3% protein (2x) and equally, hoped to find a crop that would return the heart to his heavy clay soils.

"We'd grown maize for several years, but gradually found the soil was losing structure and we would harvest less and less every year," he says.

"Sometimes, conditions would be too wet to either seed in spring or harvest in autumn, and there were some years when we just couldn't get on to the [Somerset] Levels to harvest at all. If harvest was wet we'd make a terrible mess of the land and to see the soil then lying bare over winter, with rain washing it down the drain, was disheartening," he says.

The decision was eventually taken to give up trying altogether at the time of the October 2010 harvest, and all of the maize land was initially returned to grass. However, without any maize, Martin set out to find something that would increase the starch in the ration, and turned his attention to wholecrop wheat.

"When the grass leys came to the end of their useful life, we used the opportunity to go back to winter wheat, which we had used for wholecropping in the days before maize," he says.

However, aware that its relatively high dry matter could make the wholecrop prone to aerobic spoilage, he decided not to compromise on the forage's preservation.

"We opted to use Safesil to preserve the crop as we'd used it before on some very wet, second cut grass silage which turned out much better than I'd expected," he says. "We've tried it a few times since and every time, it has done exactly what it's supposed to do."

"Yes, it's expensive, but it's one of the few products that actually does what it says on the pack and I feel the expense is justified.

"There are some other products that are cheaper, but as far as I'm concerned they appear to do nothing at all, and there's no point in spending money on nothing," he says.

Describing his wholecrop pits as having 'very big open faces', he adds: "We don't get across the face very quickly but we have found with Safesil it just does not go off."

"We had about 500 tonnes of second cut grass silage last year which we decided not to use Safesil on but have regretted it ever since," he says. "The forage went mouldy and with hindsight, I wish I had spent the money."

"We'll certainly be using Safesil on all of our forage this year as I don't think it's worth the compromise," he adds.

Meanwhile, he says the cows are milking exceptionally well on their total mixed ration (see box) with no detriment seen through the loss of maize.

"The wholecrop took the place of maize with virtually no change in performance," he says. "If anything, there's been an increase in butterfat but milk volume has remained the same."



"In fact, I've found wholecrop wheat is one of those crops which seems to feed better than its analysis would suggest," he adds.

Furthermore, he says that milk from forage is on target at around 3,000 litres and he has been able to cut the blend in the ration by 1kg/cow/day since wholecrop went into the mix.

"This is in part because of the better season, but I am also very happy with the performance of the ration," he says.

Barrow Hill Farm Facts

- ◆ 270 milking Holsteins with dairy cross beef sold as stores
- ◆ Milking herd housed all year
- ◆ Milk sold to Sainsbury's via Dairy Crest
- ◆ 9,200kg sold at 4.05% fat and 3.3% ptn (2x)
- ◆ SCC consistently under 80; Bactoscan <10

Barrow Hill Farm year-round ration (freshweights)

- ◆ 14kg first cut grass
- ◆ 8kg second cut grass
- ◆ 8kg wholecrop wheat
- ◆ 11.3kg blend (20% protein)
- ◆ 0.6kg straw
- ◆ Minerals
- ◆ No parlour or out of parlour concentrates
- ◆ Ration formulated by Andy Strzelecki of Kelvin Cave Ltd

