

# Lean towards leaf to get most from swards

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**O**ur measuring farms grew an average of 45kg DM/ha daily this week, ranging from 15 to 59kg DM/ha/day. This figure is slightly back on the 10-year average for the week and ahead of last year, when growth rates were initially slow, but doubled in just seven days in May, leading to grass quality headaches.

Now is the time to keep tabs on grass quality. Believe it or not, there are plenty of farms taking out paddocks already. While the nights are still cold

and grass hasn't really had a chance to kick on, growth rates are still high enough to service daily demand on most farms. A 45kg DM/ha/day growth rate will be matching demand exactly on a farm stocked at 2.5LU/ha.

We want our cattle grazing grass when it hits the three-leaf stage, soon after this the leaves begin to die and the ratio of stem-to-leaf increases. Stemmy grass contains 20% less energy for the animal than leafy material.

The next time you move cattle, pull up some grass plants from the new paddock. Are there three green, healthy leaves present?

Next week, in the final page

## Key points

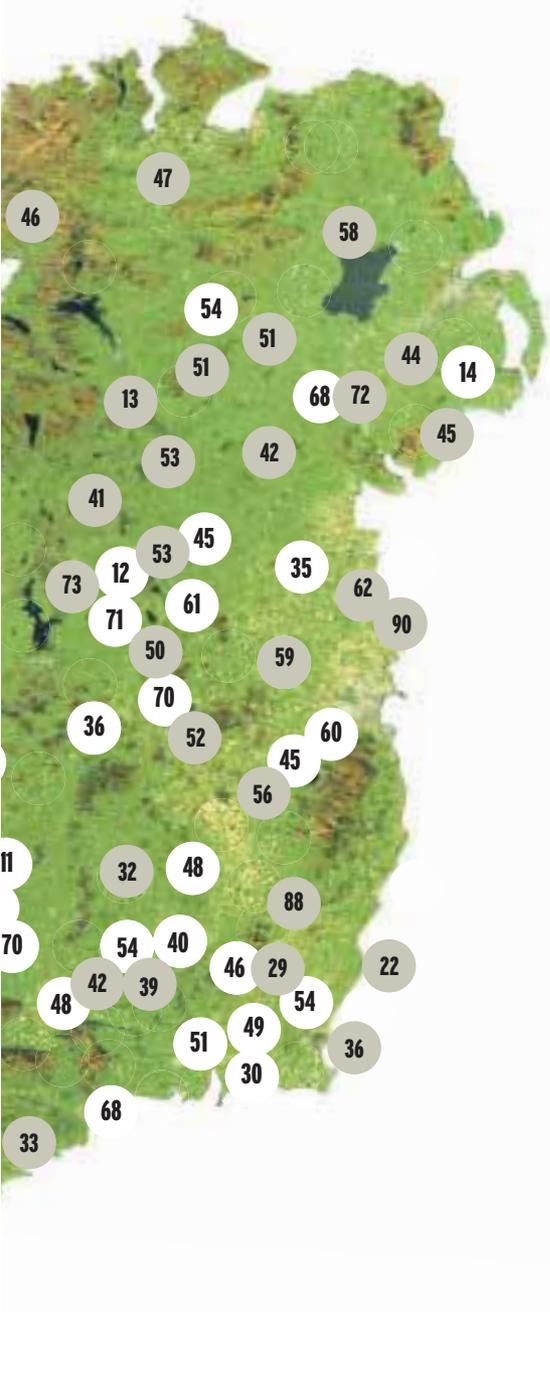
- ➔ 45kg DM/ha/day growth rate.
- ➔ Range: 15 to 59kg DM/ha/day.
- ➔ Look at grass plants in new paddocks - how many live leaves?
- ➔ Aim to have 12 to 14 days of grass ahead of stock now.
- ➔ Aim to be back in a paddock in three weeks' time.

of our grassland management Farmer Know-How series, we look at remedies for farms with too much or too little grass at the moment. The pre-

vious two editions of the *Irish Farmers Journal* contain step-by-step guides on actually measuring the farm.

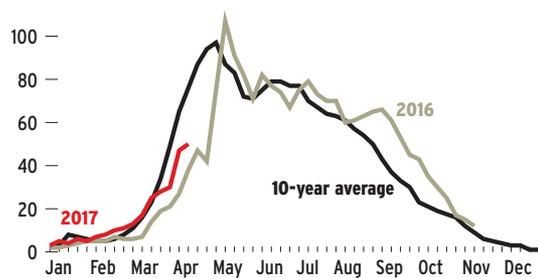
At the moment, we should have 12-14 days' worth of grass on the farm - meaning if growth were to cease, we could keep cattle fed for a fortnight. At current growth rates, a grass plant will be producing a new leaf every seven days after a tight grazing - so we should be aiming to leave a paddock and be back in 21 days later.

Rate of new leaf appearance depends on grass growth and we aim to stretch our rotation in slower growth periods and likewise reduce it by removing paddocks when growth accelerates.



## 10-year average grass growth

kg DM/ha/day



**John McSweeney**  
Co Cork

System: suckler to bull beef  
Soil: relatively dry  
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 775  
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 29

My stocking rate is below optimum level at the moment, so I have closed up extra ground for silage. All silage is baled here, so I can take out paddocks as required or go back in and graze them if I run short. I find this way I keep quality in the silage and am flexible with the amount of grass I have. I tend to spread only 50 to 60 units of N per acre on these paddocks and cut at four to five weeks. My bulls are nearly finished under 16 months and should average 380kg.

I will change my Angus bull after this year and aim for a bull with better terminal characteristics, to increase carcase weight. I have bought in over 90 calves this year to increase output and 18 yearlings. Some of these calves will be sold live at the end of the year and more will be kept on to next year to store or finish. The purchased yearlings will be finished off grass and I am aiming for a 300kg carcase with ration fed for the final six weeks.



**Michael McDonald**  
Co Kilkenny

System: suckler to weanling  
Soil: mostly heavy  
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 839  
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 59

There is plenty of grass on farm at the moment, as demand is quite low - cows are not due to calve until 10 July and are being restricted. I've taken my chance to spray off 15 acres for reseeding. Last year's spring-born weanlings have been out on/off since the end of January and full-time since late-March. I targeted them towards silage ground and they worked through it well. Autumn-born weanlings were given access to paddocks during March, weaned at the end of the month and are now running separately.

All cows were given dry-cow tubes post-weaning, as there was an issue last year with mastitis. Silage ground has been closed nearly two weeks at this stage. It received three bags of 18-6-12, a bag of urea and 1,500 gallons of slurry per acre. Any surplus grass over the coming weeks will be taken off as silage, in order to keep quality in the sward.



**Matthew Murphy**  
Newford Herd, Co Galway

System: suckler to steer beef  
Soil: dry to heavy  
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 1,115  
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): 77

The second rotation began on the home farm on 6 April. Current daily grass demand is 49kg DM/ha and this is the first week that we're building grass supply - the magic day has come. All of our silage ground is now closed and, as the regrowth was too heavy for slurry, it got two bags of urea and one bag of 0-7-30 per acre. In all, 103 cows have now calved, with 106 calves on the ground, equating to 92% of the herd. Of these, 102 are grazing. Average calf weight thus far has been 43kg, and 91% of the herd was assigned a calving score of 1 (no assistance) or 2 (slight assistance).

Breeding is starting next Monday, and there is a lot of heat activity in the fields, thankfully. Cows are tail-painted, and we are recording heats at the moment. They also got their leptospirosis vaccination and a mineral bolus. The two teaser bulls are arriving this week. They are blood tested, vaccinated and will be kept in quarantine until breeding.



**Sean Hayes**  
Co Clare

System: suckler to store  
Soil: variable  
Avg farm cover (kg DM/ha): 1,145  
Grass growth (kg DM/ha/day): n/a

We've yet to get the big spurt in growth down here, and I've about 10 days of grass ahead of my cows and calves on the outfarm. I'm going in straightaway with a bag and a half of 18-6-12 on grazed paddocks. I'll be sticking with the P and K for the next couple of rounds, to work on soil fertility. All grazing ground got 23 units of nitrogen in the form of urea on 11 February. All stock have been out at grass since the end of March, and cattle are cleaning paddocks off nicely.

Silage ground has been closed since 10 April. I managed to get 2,500 gallons/acre of slurry on one of the silage fields. This ground subsequently got a bag of 0-7-30 and 90 units of nitrogen. Silage ground that didn't get slurry received two bags of 0-7-30 and 90 units of nitrogen. I'm putting a big emphasis on cutting top-quality silage this year for my autumn-calvers, and I pushed hard to get all silage ground grazed off before closing.



Teagasc/Irish Farmers Journal

# BETTER FARM BEEF CHALLENGE

## Spring or summer debate in Longford

New Longford BETTER farmer is trying to decide when to calve his suckler herd, writes Ciarán Lenehan

Robert Abbott keeps a herd of 35 suckler cows on a single 30ha block of land near Edgeworthstown in Co Longford. At present, the herd's calving pattern is split between spring (March-April) and late summer (July-August) and this aspect of Robert's system is fast becoming the main subject of debate for the management team – when is the best time for Robert's cows to calve?

This year, 22 cows slot into the spring herd and 11 in summer. While split herds like this can help with cashflow, Robert is keen to move to a single calving period.

"I think if I had a hundred cows it would make sense to split into two, but I don't!



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I feel like 36 cows would be my ideal number and I want to finish some stock too. One calving period would streamline things – I feel I would be well able to manage the 36 in one block. The cashflow thing isn't a huge issue here as I've established a small sheep flock to fill the cash hole in late summer," Robert said.

There are pros and cons to both spring and summer calving, but at the end of the day it all depends on individual circumstances. For me, it's about land, facilities and personal availability. Many farmers will start at the end when choosing a calving date – what type of animal do I hope to sell/slaughter and what time of the year do I want to sell?

Is this the right way to go about it? Or should we instead be thinking:

- When we can typically get grazing?
- What capacity there is to hold cows and calves inside in a healthy environment?
- And, most importantly, what periods in the year suit best from a labour point of view?

If we can graze readily in March, have plenty of calving pens and creep areas and have no big external commitments in the spring, then spring calving is a no-brainer. We'll get a long grazing season and lots of weight gain from cheap grazed grass.

In reality, there are plenty of suckler farms out there on heavy soils with limited housing that can and do come under pressure in sluggish springs, including Robert's.

"I used to start calving in January and February, but stopped this year. I just felt like I was getting caught out with bad springs more often than not and February became a fire-fighting exercise with pneumonia and scour setting in. Our housing facilities are decent, but can't



Spring-born calves on Robert Abbott's farm.

### Adviser comment

John Greaney

The calving pattern was highlighted on our first visit to Robert's. Decent facilities exist already and he's in a good position to go all spring calving. Gaining cheap weight at grass is the cornerstone of all beef systems and with a tight calving spread he'll have a more uniform bunch of stock at grass to facilitate this. As he works off farm on a weekly basis and has a young family it makes sense to simplify the system.

going again in time to maintain, or even reduce her calving interval.

Many split calving spreads come about by giving empty cows a second chance and Robert admits that this led to his own split. However, he was quick to discover that summer calving has its benefits too.

"To be honest, it felt like a great time to be calving cows. They came to a paddock near the house in the days before calving and I never had to assist one last year. Only a couple of cows actually went inside. After a day or two in this maternity paddock they went back down to the main group. I ran them with the spring calvers for a few weeks post turnout and thereafter followed the spring herd with the summer cows. This was to stop them getting overfat in the runup to calving and also meant that I never had to push the spring group too hard to graze tight – which would've benefited them too. I didn't have to vaccinate the summer calvers for scour either, as the risk was lower."

### The verdict

At present, Robert is leaning toward an all spring calving pattern, but very much a late-spring one. He is happy with his decision to stop any calving before March and confident that he and his yard can handle the increased calvings in what is currently an eight week period. Both the BETTER team and his local B & T adviser Shane Devaney are keen to push weight gain from grass on the farm and Robert himself knows that this pattern suits his farm from a grazing point of view.

**MORE ONLINE**  
More on Robert's farm on farmersjournal.ie next week

### \*Guide to traffic lights

**Fixed costs:**  
● <€350/ha  
● <€550/ha  
● >€550/ha

**€/hr worked:**  
(as prop of net profit)  
● >€12.50/hr  
● <€12.50/  
● <€5/hr

**Cashflow:**  
(consecutive months without sales - incl. sheep)  
● <5  
● <7  
● >7

**Robert Abbott, Co Longford**

**Fixed costs** ●

**€/hr labour** ●

**Cashflow** ●

<b>Calving pattern</b>	Split (spring and summer)
<b>Farm system</b>	Suckler to weanling
<b>Farm size</b>	30.4ha
<b>2016 gross margin</b>	€604/ha
<b>Land type</b>	Variable

### Spring calving

**Pro** ✓  
Getting as much grass into the diet as possible  
Cheap winter feed requirement for cow – using her own reserves which were built up at grass  
Ideal for weanling sellers who cannot carry calves over winter  
Can suit 20-month bull and 24-month steer systems  
Cows are stronger to capitalise on jump in cow milk yield

**Con** ✗  
Big demand for grass at time when conditions are variable  
Often pressure on housing facilities  
Calf health can be an issue in inclement weather/sub-standard sheds  
Later-calving cows can get lazy after a long winter and be less inclined to calve themselves  
Feed and straw costs rise when turnout is delayed

### Summer calving

**Pro** ✓  
Typically ideal weather for young calves  
Minimal requirement for facilities  
Often breeding cows indoors – can facilitate AI  
Cows can be weaned in spring and held indoors to reduce grazing pressure  
Longer days can suit herding in part-time operations  
Cows are often 'fitter' for calving themselves  
Cows can be used to clean-up behind other stock groups

**Con** ✗  
Must feed cow well over winter to drive calf performance  
Less grass in diet  
Must carry calf over winter  
Body condition can be difficult to manage  
Calving when grass growth begins to slow down  
Cost/kg of beef produced on the farm is generally higher than in spring  
Peak May grass growth can be hard to manage