

Only change doesn't change

Keeping up with new technology and business structures, as well as high production performance, is the key to success on this tillage farm in north Kildare

Ivan Whitten
Teagasc, Naas

Bart Maertens' farm is located at Loughanure Clane. Since completing his Green Cert in 2000, Bart has farmed with his mother Noella and, until two years ago, his late father Noel. The family came from Belgium in 1986, when Bart was four, and have built a substantial tillage enterprise, virtually from scratch.

Bart's wife Maura works part-time on the farm, allowing for a better quality of life with their two young sons David (two) and Brian (four). Their 200ha+ tillage business grows high-yielding winter wheat, winter barley and spring barley in rotation with potatoes and beans.



Bart Maertens.

Company structure

Setting up the company structure MTS Farms in 2012, on the advice of IFAC and Teagasc, was a key decision. "The company structure helped with succession planning; allows my mother to have an ongoing interest in the business and has enabled us to grow the assets of the business, be it machinery or land, in a tax-efficient way," says Bart.

"Incorporation means you are not paying tax at the higher rate on any profits, which have admittedly been greatly reduced in recent years. Tax and levies on income can be up to 55% compared with 12.5% in the company. The company structure is also a good way to contribute to a pension.

"I'd advise anyone contemplating this move to consider it during a quiet time of the year as there are a lot of hurdles to jump and critical decisions to be made involving the accountant, solicitor, agricultural advisor, bank manager and even your agri merchant."

Changes to long term land leases: The Finance Act for 2015

The introduction of tax exempted income thresholds of €18,000 to €22,500 (value of rent and entitlements) on five- to seven-year land leases and permitting company structures to act as lessee was very beneficial for MTS Farms.

"It means we are not taking land for 11 months but have a more stable tillage land bank, allowing us to put a long-term crop rotation plan place. Longer leases also allow us to address soil fertility and grass weed issues in the knowledge that we will be farming the land for a number of years."

Soil sampling and nitrates

The Maertens family base all their crop nutrition applications on soil samples taken every three years. "We draw up an annual fertiliser plan each January with Ivan," says Bart. "The plan is to maximise crop yields and grow them as profitably as possible. With this in mind, we are always trying to balance the off-takes from our yields.

"In recent years, Ivan has changed our compound fertiliser to 4.5 bags of 10:8:20 + S or 11:7:23 + S reflecting an increasing requirement for phosphorous and potash on the farm."

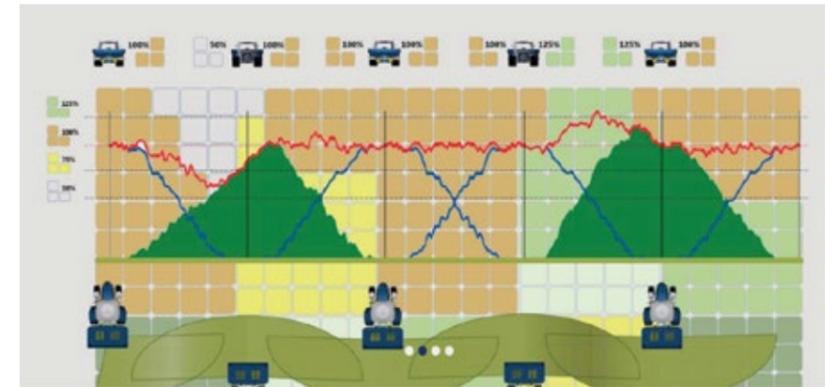


Brian, Maura, Bart and David Maertens.

Organic manures

The farm has a six-bay slatted unit on the farm and takes in finishing cattle each winter on a per-head basis. Bart places high importance on this quality imported "finishing slurry" for use on fields destined for early and main crop potatoes. "The slurry definitely helps to boost dry matter in the potatoes," he says.

"In recent years, we have started using pelletised poultry pellets and dry layers' manure on winter barley and wheat from Organic Fertilisers in Newry. We believe that the different types of organic manure are providing a wide range of major and minor nutrients to a hungry crop during early spring and they are helping to improve soil microbiology too."



Improving accuracy under Tillage TAMS

Bart purchased a new Amazone UX4200 trailed sprayer in autumn 2017 under the Tillage TAMS. "After careful consideration and viewing all the options we decided to go for a sprayer that is one of, if not the highest-spec trailed sprayers in the country," says Bart. "But we don't buy features for fun, they have to be financially justified."

Bart opted for some really clever specs that will help ease his daily workload while also getting the best results possible from his crops.

The machine is fully ISOBUS. It comes with all the features you tend to see on sprayers of this sophistication. Features include steering axle with incorporated slope detection, twin-pump system, distance control on the booms (Bart opted for the higher four-sensor option), auto-rate control and Amatron3 terminal with joystick control.

The two options that perhaps I feel Bart will gain most from are the auto-cleaning cycles which are controlled from the operator's seat. The sprayer can be thoroughly cleaned without leaving the tractor cab, reducing downtime.

The second is that he will see saving coming from the Amaswitch option. (Bart's was the first in the country). This is individual nozzle shut on/off that is controlled via GPS. It minimises the amount of excessive overlap possible with savings of up to 5% on

chemicals claimed.

"That allows me to save money and also protect the environment by ensuring chemicals only go to exactly where they are needed," says Bart. "It was the grant under the TAMS scheme which enabled me to go for this machine."

“The system will close the spreader's shutters in areas where fertiliser has been applied

In recent weeks, Bart has purchased a new Bogballe M35W fertiliser spreader with GPS section control to ensure optimised overlap on headlands and in wedges. The system adjusts the application rate of the fertiliser to the shape of the field.

"The system works with an infinite number of sections and regulates steplessly both in wedges and on headland," says Bart. "The system will automatically close the spreader's shutters in areas where fertiliser has already been applied – for example on the headland."

"For us, investing in technology is the way to go, even when times are tough," concludes Bart.

“The Maertens base all their crop nutrition applications on soil samples taken every three years

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