

Getting started with clover

There is growing interest in white clover on grassland farms.

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Farms that have established grass-clover swards (over 12 months old) and that have adequate clover content (over 20%) are in a position to reduce chemical N on individual paddocks from May onwards. Establishing a grass-clover sward across an entire farm can take a number of years using conventional reseeding, however.

Introducing clover into existing grass swards (over-sowing) is a simpler, more cost-effective option in the early part of the year, and should be done from early April to late May.

Success depends on weather conditions around sowing and post-sowing grazing management.

Choose paddocks that have a high perennial ryegrass content, low weed content and adequate soil fertility for oversowing this year. Paddocks that

have a low perennial ryegrass content and/or high weed content are not suitable for over-sowing. A full reseed will be more suitable (full reseeds will be discussed in the next edition).

Key steps involved when over-sowing white clover

- White clover seed can be broadcast onto the sward or stitched in using a suitable machine.

- If broadcasting with a fertiliser spreader, mix clover seed with 0:7:30 fertiliser and only add the clover to the spreader when you are in the field. This will help avoid clover settling at the base of the spreader.

- Do a maximum of 2ha at a time (to avoid seed settling), and spread in two directions across the field.

- Best practice is to over-sow directly after grazing (≤ 4 cm post-grazing sward height or after cutting the paddock for surplus bales – ideally only over-sow three to four paddocks at a time.

- Control weeds before you consider

over-sowing clover – remember, some herbicides have a residue of up to four months – always check the residual time on the label of the product or seek advice on a suitable weed control product.

- Use a slightly higher seeding rate (5kg/ha) for over-sowing compared to a full reseed, to overcome the issues with slugs and possibly a lower germination rate.

- Sow with a fertiliser that contains phosphorus, as this will favour establishment, particularly if soil fertility is low. One bag of 0:7:30 or 0:10:20 per acre. If possible, reduce N fertiliser post over-sowing.

- Roll paddocks post-sowing. Soil to seed contact is one of the most crucial factors effecting germination. Apply watery slurry (if available) – ideally at around 2,000 gallons/ac.

- Ideally, over-sow on well managed grassland – not suitable on old 'butty' swards with a low content of perennial ryegrass – if this is the case, a full reseed is a better option.

Management of grass-clover swards after over-sowing

Poor establishment occurs where grass gets too strong after over-sowing. This is the single biggest reason for failure that lies within the farmer's control.

The most important recommendation is for tight grazing for the first three grazings post-sowing – keep pre-grazing herbage mass over 1,200kg DM and grazing swards to ≤ 4 cm. This allows light to penetrate to the base of the sward, which is essential for clover establishment.

Once clover is present in the swards, it is vital to use clover-safe herbicides. When over-sowing clover into existing grass swards, it may be better to control more established weeds before over-sowing white clover into the sward.

Over-sowing is just the first part of your strategy to grow more clover and use less N fertiliser. We'll revisit clover agronomy in the March-April edition.

