

Benefits of Improving Grassland Management

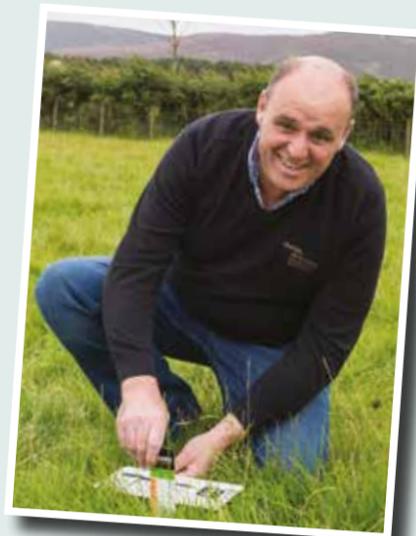
First-generation Lanarkshire farmer **Michael Shannon** has spent ten years developing and perfecting his paddock grazing system in order to make his farm more profitable.



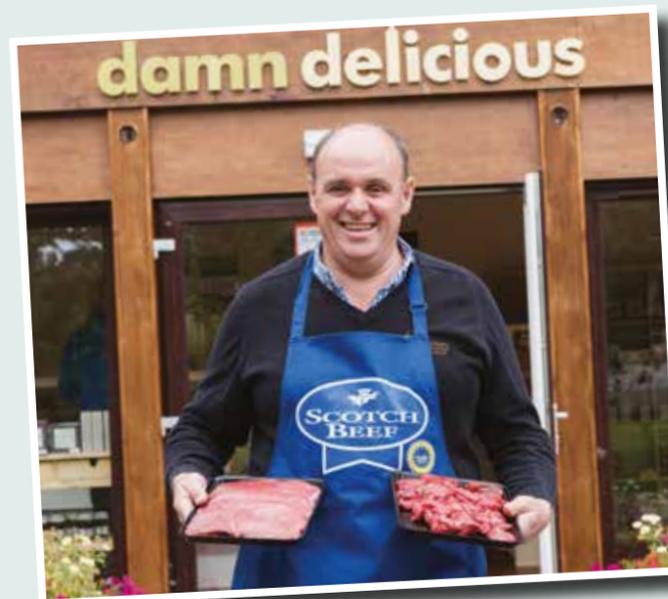
Speaking at a Better Grazing meeting held in Perth in the autumn, he told farmers who attended that “grass is king” and not to over-complicate their systems, but to keep things simple and relevant to their own farms in order to increase production and save costs.

Michael and his wife Michelle moved to Thankerton Camp, near Biggar, in 1996 and run a 100% forage system. The farm’s 84 hectares are divided roughly into half-hectare paddocks, and Michael moves cattle every day using electric fences on a 21-day rotation.

“Once the system is set up, the cattle quickly get into the routine of moving and I can do everything myself with no other labour and no dog,” he said.



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Michael buys native (preferably Aberdeen Angus) cross stores and finishes them on forage for his farm shop, Damn Delicious, with the surplus sold deadweight. The farm and farm shop are very much a family business, with Michelle and their eight children all helping out where they can.

He said: “There are around 200 cattle on the farm and I finish about 150 each year - two-thirds for the shop and one-third for Highland Meats. My system is not about speed of finishing; it is about profitability.”

The farm also carries 280 ewes, and Michael rotationally grazes the sheep at 24 ewes with lambs per hectare, shifting them every two to three days. Even with this high stocking rate, each year he has surplus grass to make silage.

Stocking rate for the cattle is based on liveweight; at the peak in the spring it is nearly 3,000kg liveweight per hectare, dropping to 2,400kg and then 2,000kg at the end of the season.

He said: “I have never had a year when I have had enough livestock to eat all the grass at its peak growing time.

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Michael recommended the optimum time to graze is when the grass is at 10 to 12cm, and it is critical to avoid grazing it after the third day to prevent stock eating any re-growth.



He is currently achieving 600kg of liveweight per hectare and one of his targets is that, between purchase and finishing, the value of every beast he brings onto his farm must increase by £1 per day off grass alone. He calculates his summer grazing system costs 29p per head of cattle per day, while his wintering system costs 48p per head per day, including fertiliser and reseeding.

Over the winter months the cattle are strip-grazed on Swift, which is a hybrid rape/kale, with access to silage. He has recently tried fodder beet, which has increased his winter daily liveweight gain, and he has been impressed with it.

He said: “Feeding cattle kale and silage is basically a maintenance

diet where they only gain about 0.25kg per day, but the ones on fodder beet have been gaining about 0.7kg per day.”

Each year, about ten hectares are taken out of grass and sown in kale, followed by spring barley undersown with grass. The first-year grass is grazed by sheep, before being grazed for up to five years by cattle.

By summer 2018 Michael plans to have 300 cattle and 300 breeding ewes on the paddock grazing system, with reduced winter numbers of 200 cattle.

He said: “With Brexit looming, I plan to make every blade of grass the best quality I can and make my 84 hectares work for me.”+

QMS BETTER GRAZING PROJECT

The three-year Better Grazing project launched this summer follows the successful QMS Grazing Group project, which came to an end in the spring.

There are six regional groups around Scotland, which have the aim of helping farmers identify opportunities to improve profitability through better utilisation of grazed grass.

The new programme isn’t based around a host farm. Instead there are regular farm visits to those who have already made changes to their grazing management or to new group members keen to make better use of their grass with the help and support of the rest of the group.



Better Grazing = Better Business

