

TRIPLLET LAMB PERFORMANCE SOARS WITH PLANTAIN BOOST

The introduction of plantain, a mineral-rich grazing herb with a great track record in New Zealand, has proved a huge success on a Borders livestock farm.

The perennial herb has been introduced at Pirntaton, near Galashiels, one of QMS's Grazing Group host farms.

Host farmer Jim Logan has managed to increase stock numbers significantly and cut feeding costs during the process, largely by improving grass management while better fitting feed requirements to the grass growth curve.

Pirntaton extends to 1,400 acres (570 hectares) rising from 750 feet to 1,700 feet and has a mixture of temporary and permanent grass with a significant area of rough grazing.

Jim had suggested growing plantain at one of the early grazing group meetings after reading about its valuable contribution to New Zealand grazing systems. Grazing consultant Trevor Cook, who has attended many meetings by invitation of QMS, was also keen the Logans tried a small area.

The establishment of an initial 32 hectares of plantain, mixed with red and white clover, has been a huge success. The crop is ideally suited to feeding priority groups of animals, such as triplet-rearing ewes or lambed hogs, so this spring Jim decided to see if his ewes could successfully rear triplets.



Plantain, mixed with red and white clover



Small paddocks of plantain mix were grazed rotationally



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The 32 acres of plantain and clover mix was divided into five paddocks and grazed rotationally with 70 sets of triplets followed by 170 ewes with singles in a leader/follower system.

"It was unbelievable how healthy and well-thriven the triplets were – they were some of the best lambs on the farm," said Jim.

This was backed up by his weaning figures, which showed that the average weaning weight for the triplets, adjusted to 100 days, was 35.8kg. Single lambs averaged 39kg and the twins, which were rotationally grazed on standard grass mixtures, averaged 33kg.

These results have given Jim the confidence to establish a further 34 acres of plantain this season.

As well as increasing his ewe numbers from 1400 when the Grazing Group project began to 2000 this year, Jim has also changed breeds.

He has used Abertex and Romney genetics to upgrade the lowground breeding flock while continuing to use home-bred Suffolk and Texels as terminal sires. Suffolks, Texels and Abertex are bred pure and successfully sold as grass-fed rams.

The Blackface hill ewes have been replaced by Lairg Cheviots, which are crossed with Lleys to improve production. The lambing percentage across both flocks this year was 152% weaned.

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"Lambing in late April/May means a lower scan, but survivability of the lambs is very good," observed Jim.

He has also benefited from big savings on ewe concentrates, with his total feed bill down to £1.22 per lowground ewe last winter. He reckons his saving on concentrate is over 80% per head, while ewe numbers have already increased by over 20%.

"I avoided feeding any concentrate to the 700 ewes carrying twins and singles this spring by grazing them rotationally for four weeks before lambing," Jim commented.

"It was amazing how well the ewes performed on the little, high-quality grass that was available to them, with the added bonus that early rotational grazing promotes grass growth for when I need it to set stock for lambing."

The whole approach to grass management has been a revelation to many members of the QMS Grazing Group. When grass growth is strong and Jim knows that he has plenty grass supply ahead of him, paddocks will be taken out of the grazing round and cut for silage. This flexible approach ensures that grass quality and utilisation (for grazing) is maintained. Jim said that he was almost at the stage of making his full silage requirement from cutting those grazing paddocks as a grazing management tool.

Fertiliser applications are now better targeted, according to Jim. "I applied 6kg per acre to grazing ground in late March and a further 6kg per acre in early September. This has not only extended the grazing season but the residual effect seems to help the vigour of early spring grass."

One of the key aims of the QMS Grazing Groups is to maximise kg of meat per acre of grass, and Jim has shown at Pirntaton that it can be done.

"Our system is still far from perfect and doesn't finish lambs any faster or at heavier weights than before," he said. "However, it definitely produces more off the same area at a much lower cost."