

Possible Catch Crops

Assumption:- Winter cereal eg winter barley removed for wholecrop in early July or winter barley combined at the beginning of August.

1. Stubble Turnips – generally grazed off before Christmas leaving bare ground in winter/early spring.
2. Rape/Kale hybrids – would need sowing as early as possible after whole crop barley in late July, early August with average yields of between 4 – 6 t DM/ha. Could provide some feed post Christmas (snow permitting). Rape/kale hybrids are hardy to freezing conditions but can suffer from heavy snow damage – as can kale. The problem appears to be thin stems which get broken. Thin stems can result from too high a seed rate or possibly disease.
3. Grazing Rye – usually sown August/early September, usually to provide early spring grazing in March with possible second grazing in April prior to ploughing out to follow with grass, kale (or in favourable districts forage maize). It is usual to get some grazing off the rye in autumn as it doesn't want to entering the winter too proud. The earlier the rye can be sown the better established it is before winter, the stronger and earlier the growth in spring and co-incidentally the more production in autumn too. The risk with rye is that it can quickly get stemmy and there is a relatively short window of use. Although slower into spring production, Italian Ryegrass is generally more versatile and user friendly.
4. Italian Ryegrass – the "annual version" of IRG known as Westerwolds is generally not considered suitable as it is not considered sufficiently winter-hardy. Even "proper" biennial Italian Ryegrass may not be sufficiently winter hardy in a severe winter such as that in 2009/2010. As with rye, IRG is generally sown in August/early September. It will provide light autumn grazing; how much, will again depend on when it is sown but it should again not go into the winter too proud. It will then provide an early bite grazing of 1 – 1.5 t DM/ha at the end of March/early April. Thereafter unlike Rye it can be shut up for first cut silage (taken end May/early June) typically yielding 6 t DM/ha or subjected to further grazing. Production in the second harvest year is rarely as impressive as in the first and the early bite is always later.
5. Emergency grazing of winter cereals with sheep – compared to other more mild parts of the UK, the opportunities for doing this under Scottish conditions are likely to be far less but essentially if there is leafy growth available in March/April before stem extension starts then it is possible to graze it. The problem comes if stem extension has started, grazing then can seriously impact on grain yield.
6. Grazing cereal stubbles overwinter – all of us are aware how much volunteer cereal springs up behind the combine (especially 6 row barley); instead of wasting it, why not graze it off before ploughing for a spring crop. Likewise graze-off OSR volunteers.

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