

NE Organic Discussion Group

Newsletter



August 2020

Sources of Information

For those of who haven't so far, it is worth looking at the organic pages of the SRUC web site [Organic Farming - SRUC](#). Some of the information is now a bit outdated but much of it is still relevant.

There are several sections: -

Advice & Consultancy
Organic Learning & Training
What is organic Farming?
Organic FAQ's
Organic Farming Event Reports (a bit outdated 2010-2016 but still interesting)
Organic Farming Technical Summaries (listed below)

Livestock

- [Pigs: Organic Pig Production](#)
- [Poultry: Care of Organic Hatching Eggs](#)
- [Poultry: Feather Pecking](#)
- [Poultry: Producing Safe-to-Eat Table Eggs](#)
- [Sheep: Nutrition of Late-Pregnant Ewes](#)
- [Sheep: Organic Stocking Rates](#)
- [Sheep: Producing a Closed Flock with Easy Care Attributes](#)

Grassland

- [Oversowing Clover into Existing Grass Swards](#)

Cereals

- [Weed control in Organic Cereals](#)
- [Minimising Leatherjacket Damage in Organic Cereals](#)

Legumes

- [Field Beans and Lupins](#)

Soil

- [The role of soil aerators in grassland](#)
- [Phosphate \(P\) and potash \(K\) in organic farming](#)

Conversion

- [Timing the Start of the Conversion](#)
- [Step by Step Guide Towards Conversion](#)

Scottish Organic Forum
Scottish Organic Action Plan

Previous Meetings

I thought it would be interesting to look back at some of the August meetings over the last three years since the group started. In 2019 there was no meeting in August, so I have enclosed the summaries for the July and September meetings. In 2019 we introduced podcasts of the meetings and these can be found at [Organics Discussion Group from the Farm Advisory Service](#). For more information see the FAS pages at the link or come back to me.

16/08/2017 Mains of Thornton

This was the 3rd meeting of the North East Organic Discussion Group held at Mains of Thornton courtesy of Ian Cooper & Partners.

There was an arable focus to the meeting and in addition to seeing the potatoes, spring oats, spring barley and recently sown forage crops we also heard about the opportunities for letting organic ground for growing potatoes and carrots. The host farmer described how he is increasing yields and rivalling performance on conventional farms.

We also saw the paddock grazing system and saw and heard how well the yearling cattle were performing on it. Increased daily live weight gains (av. 1.35kg/hd/day, top 2kg/hd/day) and a reduction in the area required so more available for silage.

Once again we heard about the importance of soil analyses and a comparison of the samples, taken for benchmarking, using the Modified Morgans and Olsen phosphate analyses methods was given.



21/08/2018 Tap o'Noth

We started with a visit to Tap o'Noth Farm. James Reid, who runs the unit along with his partner introduced the farm, community supported agriculture and permaculture. From quarter of an acre they produce enough vegetables to supply 50 households for 22 weeks. He led us on a tour of the market garden. As we went round he explained his bio-intensive farming method, how the garden has been designed and managed. We saw the specialist small scale tools/equipment he uses. We also saw his willow windbreaks and fruit production.

We then went to the hall in Rynie and Alistair Trail, Food and Drink Consultant, SAC Consulting explained about the Rural Innovation Support Service (RISS). He explained what it is, how it operates and gave those attending an opportunity to propose possible project ideas so he could advise as to whether RISS might be able to help.



30/07/19 Mains of Thornton

After an introduction we went on a farm walk visiting winter oats; an undersown spring barley and vetch mix; spring oilseed rape; mixtures of winter barley, beans and oilseed rape (including oilseed rape on its own) and saw the System Cameleon including a demonstration. As we went we discussed the crops and their growing systems and Murray Cooper (the host farmer) explained his System Cameleon and how it worked (video clips of it working are attached). The main topics discussed were:- row spacing, weeding and intercropping. It was obvious that weeding was crucial especially with the oilseed rape – the spring oilseed rape was very weedy and the pure stand of winter oilseed rape had been a complete failure.

Dr. Robin Walker, Research Agronomist, SRUC gave the following summary:-

In terms of messages:

There was a genuine interest in intercrops at the meeting, in terms of how best to integrate different species as well as varieties, with some concerns about maturity dates and end uses. SRUC experience of spring grown intercrops as part of Scottish Government programmes going back to around 2006 and current EU programmes such as ReMIX, as well as feedback from a lot of farmers over the years are that a pea-barley intercrops, but also pea-wheat intercrops destined for combine / grain are generally a pretty reliable mix if varieties are chosen carefully. In terms of maturity dates of an intercrop of this type, as long as maturity dates aren't too far apart if grown on their own, the different species (or varieties) tend to merge their ripening dates as a result of competition, which helps with determining the best time to combine. If the mix is being used for feed, there is no real issue in terms of sorting seed, but as grain sizes of these crops are fairly distinct, separation is relatively

simple if required. These mixtures also have the opportunity to be wholecropped, and if an undersown grass-clover is used in the mix, they can be a valuable lead into grazed period of the rotation, or for further silage opportunities in subsequent years.

There was also a lot of interest in organic oilseed rape as Norvite are keen to develop the crop in Scotland, although there was also a fair bit of concern from the attendees of the meeting. Murray had a spring oilseed rape crop that was pretty weedy, but he was hopeful to get some saleable OSR seed from his crop, his winter OSR crop which was part of a winter barley and spring bean mix was unlikely to yield much beyond barley and perhaps some beans – primarily due to pest damage earlier in the season (birds and escaped lambs). The RISS group fact finding visit to Sweden was really useful in persuading the farmers that went that it would be possible to grow organic oilseed rape in Scotland given the similar latitude. Sweden produces around 10,000ha of organic oilseed rape annually, with yields regularly approaching 4 t/ha. Weed control seemed to be the key, and the use of precision seeders and robotic weeders such as Cameleons and Garfords seemed to be a key part of this success. As a result of this, a Cameleon machine has been purchased by Murray for this purpose. Pollen beetle can be an issue in some years, and there are some techniques that can be used to reduce the problem, but the Swedish experience of growing organic oilseed rape was to expect a crop failure perhaps one year in 5.

For more information on the local organic oilseed rape trials see the link below. It is a link to a video of their last virtual meeting on 24th June 2020.

<https://clickv.ie/w/D0bo>



20/09/20 The Knock

This was meeting 2 of the series of 4 meetings for 2019/20. After a welcome from Aileen Buchanan and an introduction to the farm by the farmer, Roger Polson, the meeting started with a farm walk. The stops were: - newly weaned calves; the cow shed and weeping wall FYM midden; hedges; woodland; the gimmers; a look at beans and carrots while walking through grass/clover; a pond and the reed bed. There was good discussion of Roger's farm management, conservation and the wastewater treatment system. Dr. Paul Capman, Consultant, SAC Consulting Solutions specialising in biodiversity and conservation was there to add to the discussion and his key messages were: -

- Hedges provide great habitat corridors through the farm, particularly when regularly managed through laying or coppicing to encourage new growth from the base. Their value for insects including economically important pollinators should also not be overlooked as trees and shrubs like blackthorn and hawthorn provide a crucial nectar and pollen source early in the year, before most wildflowers have appeared.

- Low input arable management options for biodiversity such as conservation headlands and wild bird seed mixes can be at risk of becoming overgrown by injurious weeds such as docks and thistles if they are kept in one place for more than 2-3 years. Rotating these options around the farm can help prevent this, even if it is tempting to just keep such options in awkward or poorly yielding parts of fields.
- SSSI management at the Knock has become too prescriptive and bureaucratic in terms of grazing dates and stocking levels, making it less attractive to the farmer. SNH is currently investigating the possibility of introducing outcome-based agri-environment schemes where payments are based on annual monitoring of habitats and the presence or absence of positive and negative indicator species. This would give farmers more flexibility over dates of grazing and numbers of livestock, so long as the desired outcome is delivered.

The walk also gave ample time for networking.

After refreshments Dr. Lorna MacPherson, Dairy Consultant, SAC Consulting Solutions (who also has experience on rationing for beef cows and sheep) gave a presentation on suckler cow and ewe nutrition looking forward to the winter. Her take home messages were: -

- Get your silage analysed so quality is known. Do a forage budget to work out how much tonnes of dry matter are available. May be worth doing this year if you have very wet silage.
- Take advice on rations so that dry cows calve at their target condition score. High energy silages are great but not so appropriate for dry suckler cows. Forages with good protein levels can be fed with straw to fill cows up and meet requirements. Watch low protein, high energy silages, especially if adding straw. Supplementary protein will be necessary for rumen function.
- Target your forages to the different groups of livestock on your farm. Poorer quality forage can go to dry cows, with better quality forage for lactating cows, 1st calvers and growing heifers.
- Management is important – start planning early and split dry cows according to condition for feeding. Separate thinner cows or 1st calving heifers, which are still growing, for a higher energy ration.
- For lactating cows make sure they do not lose too much condition after calving and that they are on a rising plane of nutrition 6 weeks before bulling for good fertility.
- For ewes, body condition score is an important management tool to maximise fertility and lamb output. Target BCS 3-3.5 for lowland ewes at tugging and prioritise good grass at 6cm for underconditioned ewes for 6-8 weeks before tugging. It takes time to alter condition – 6 to 8 weeks on good grass to alter by 1 CS unit.
- Don't forget the tups! Aim for BCS 3.5-4 at tugging as they can lose up to 15% over the tugging season. Supplementary feed is necessary for 6-8 weeks pre-tugging if BCS is below 3.5.



Upcoming Events

Making Woodland Work for You: Creation, management and funding on Scotland's west coast, Tuesday 11 August, 2–3.30pm
Online discussion, hosted by Robin and Sam Sedgwick from Crannich Farm, Isle of Mull

[Book online](#)

Event exploring woodland creation and management in the environment of the west coast:

- Virtual visit to Crannich Farm on Mull, where Sam and Robin Sedgwick have been planting and managing trees for 17 years for wood fuel and shelter, as well as to increase farm wildlife and improve soil health
- Video demonstrations of mechanical tree planting
- Q&A with Sam and Robin
- Advice on grant funding, tree species, planning and management from Scottish Forestry and the Woodland Trust
- A chance to discuss your ideas and questions with other west coast farmers, crofters and land managers.

Free of charge to crofters, farmers, woodland managers and land managers in Scotland.

Booking is required: [Book online](#)

For more information contact Ana by [email](#) or on 0793 082 4983 or Jane by [email](#) or on 0131 370 8150.

NE organic Discussion Group 1st online meeting

Tuesday 25th August 8pm till 9pm.

Mineral and Trace element nutrition for organic beef and sheep systems.

Invites and more information to follow.

Book online [NE Organic Discussion Group – Event 1 | Events helping farmers in Scotland | Farm Advisory Service](#)