

The Grass Master



It's been a busy autumn down in Cornwall for grassland contractor Ralph Sainsbury and his Claas tractor and Grass Master harrow and seeder.

Normally sowings are split 50:50 between the autumn and spring. But poor weather last spring, and an early maize harvest have tipped the balance to more autumn sowings this year. A one-man business, Ralph has taken this in his stride. His machinery set-up delivers speed and accuracy, and this together with his knowledge of seeds, ensures success.

Ralph's interest in grassland started over a decade ago. Working on a dairy farm, he had been dispatched to reseed a ley using a twin disc fertiliser spreader. But he wasn't impressed with the accuracy of the method, nor the end result. However, the seed of an idea had been sown.

Shortly after, in 2006, he bought himself a 6m OPICO grass harrow and Air 8 seeder, and set up a sideline business - Sainsbury Agri-Services. He still worked for the dairy farm but also began providing a grassland seeding service for local farms.

By 2013, the demand for his services was still growing, so he upgraded to an 8m OPICO Grass Master and Air 16 seeder, purchased from Cornwall Farm Machinery. Ralph explains:

"It was more substantial and designed for heavier use. The tines are wearing well, and I rarely need to look for spare parts.

"The hopper - at 400 litres - is larger. It will hold 10 bags of grass seed, although it would be nice if it was just a bit bigger!" (Newer models now have a 460 litre hopper).

Speed and Accuracy

"I also opted for electronic metering rather than a landwheel, and got radar as a no-cost option at the time. The radar ensures accuracy and consistency and adapts very well to the forward speed," continues Ralph.

"The 16 seed outlets are closer together than on my previous machine, so I can put more seed on at a higher forward speed. Calibration is done with the press of a button, and I can adjust the seed rate from the cab. With the wider working width, I can cover more ground, more quickly and on a good smooth cultivated surface, I can reach 15 acres/hour."

He's also impressed with the machine's distribution system. "The Air 16 seeder broadcasts seed very evenly across the working width and as the outlets are only 6 inches above the ground it's largely unaffected by windy weather.

It also has interchangeable seed rollers. "I've got one for coarse grains and a fine one for small seed and I've successfully metered pure clover at 0.5kg/acre."

Seed supplies

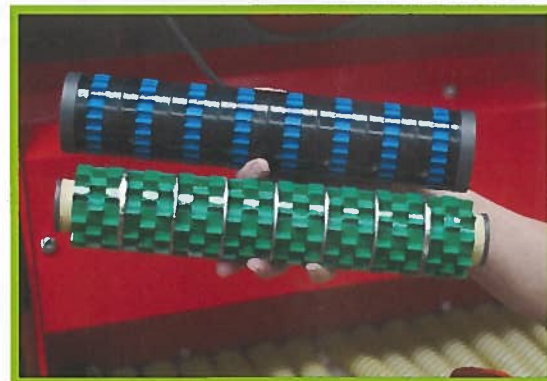
Frequently farmers have asked Ralph for his opinions on what seed mixtures they should buy. For his own interest Ralph was always re-visiting the fields to see how well the ley had established and he'd built up a sound knowledge of how ground and weather conditions affected this, and how different seed mixtures performed.

So four years ago, he decided to add seed supply to his service, and became an agent for Green Farm Seeds in Newent, Gloucestershire. "I can often match a

mixture in price or variety, and can also arrange for bespoke mixtures," explains Ralph.

"For farmers, it's now just a one phone call operation. I'm offering the whole package and I'm confident the seed will be suitable and will 'work'. Plus, I'm making a bit of extra money out of it too," he says.

Continuing, Ralph explains that customer demands change year on year. "Westerwolds and Italian ryegrass mixtures have been popular this autumn as farmers try to get an early cut next spring. I've sown more catch crops too, for farmers looking to outwinter their youngstock and extend forage supplies."



The different seed rollers - green for grass seed, and the blue/black for finer seed like clover.

Overseeding

"When it comes to overseeding, the biggest problem is that farmers think it's just a case of putting more seed onto an old ley. But if you can't see any bare ground then it's not going to work.

"Therefore, I recommend overwintering cattle on the ground so they poach it and create areas of bare soil. Another way of exposing some soil is to go over the ground with a knife aerator or slitter," explains Ralph.

"And I tell my customers, if the field looks like it needs ploughing, then it does need ploughing. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," he says. "Also, overseeding isn't going to be successful if the ground is dry and hard. In fact, the wetter the weather the better - I'll overseed in the rain sometimes."

Ralph will make two passes with the seeder calibrated at half the seed rate. "Going over a second time minimises the risk of misses. And the first lot of seed gets shaken down into the soil," he explains.

"The Grass Master is also very good for overseeding catch crops into cereal stubbles. It's a cheap way to establish stubble turnips and forage rape; it doesn't matter if the surface is uneven as it's not going to be mown. The seed of stubble turnip is very small, so I just switch to using the fine roller in the seeder."

Continuing, he says. "Modern dairy farms are looking at more technical grass leys and want more performance from them too. So we need to have the technology to sow them.

"Multi-species herbal leys are becoming more popular. The seed of Timothy and clover is very small, while lucerne seed is much bigger. Seed shapes and weights also vary.

"So there's no way that broadcasting with the spinning disc of a fertiliser spreader is going to produce an even distribution of these plant types through the ley.

This is where the Grass Master 'comes into its own', Ralph tells us. "The Air 16 seeder has 16 outlets which are spaced 0.5m apart. The metering roller drops an equal amount of seed down each pipe, and there's also a double overlap of spread. So there's no worry about how the far the seed needs to travel to give an even distribution of different plant species through the ley.

"The sowing of cover crops and EFA mixtures is currently only a small part of the business, but it's growing. These mixtures also contain a variety of species with a variety of seed shapes and sizes."

The Business Today

Today, Ralph's contracting services extend from Padstow on the north coast of Cornwall to Mevagissey on the south, Bodmin in the east, and



Ralph Sainsbury loading grass seed into the hopper.

Camborne in the west.

This year Ralph will have sown over 1500 acres, a combination of reseeding into cultivated soils, overseeding into worn leys, and establishing catch crops and cover crops into stubble.

Business has grown mostly on word of mouth and recommendations. Ralph explains: "Here in Cornwall, you're either related by blood, or through marriage. I get a lot of calls from customers' relatives. And a lot of customers sharing the same surname."

Customers are predominantly dairy farmers, with some beef and sheep farmers and horse owners. The Grass Master is kept busy from March through to the end of October, with a lull in June.

Ralph also works alongside other contracting businesses through the year, offering his seeding services to them as well as direct to his own farm customers.

"In the future, I'm hoping my sons will get involved in the business too," adds Ralph. ■



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