

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Sainfoin – September 2017

Last month I wrote upon the merits of Lucerne for providing grazing for our dairy cows in this year's very dry spring. The cows were also sustained by fields of Sainfoin. This grows earlier than the Lucerne and was being grazed in the first week of April. Thereafter, once the Lucerne came into production, the Sainfoin was utilised to allow recovery periods for the Lucerne. Sainfoin produces a dense clump of highly nutritious leaves as early as the middle of March. This gives incredibly valuable forage for ewes and lambs in a time when perhaps nothing else is available. Once grazed off, it soon regrows and can either be fed again or left to produce a crop of hay or silage in the middle of June, after the peak of flowering. I prefer to wait until the flowers are fading to ensure that nectaring bees and other invertebrates are no longer visiting the crop, in the prodigious numbers that occur when it is in full bloom. There can be so many that the humming of bees; honey, bumbles and other species, is a constant accompaniment when viewing the crop.

Sainfoin has a very special place in the long rotation sequence that we undertake at Cholderton. The Victorian County History for Wiltshire states that Sainfoin was being grown here in 1730. This has continued to the present day. In the 1950's, when nearly all Sainfoin leys were ploughed out, my father had the foresight to retain a substantial acreage here. Cholderton became the last place where the Landrace variety 'Hampshire Common' was grown, and my father, the official 'maintainer'.

It is apparent that for generations, fodder production has been fixated on the productivity of grasses and that the growing of legumes is considered very much a secondary activity. The emphasis has been on promoting the productivity of intensive Rye grass with regular doses of artificial nitrogen. A grass mixture might include a token 2 pounds to the acre of White Clover but the contribution this makes, to what is demonstrably unsustainable production, is negligible. In any case the White Clover will soon disappear being unable to cope with this level of nitrate application. This approach is fundamentally incorrect. The productivity of my forage leys has never been better because legumes are the dominant feature. In addition, the grass admixture, acting as a filler, exploits the nitrate made available by the rhizobia on the roots of the leguminous plants. Thus, it makes its own sustainable contribution to the productivity and vitality of the ley.

Sainfoin will thrive on the poorest of alkaline soils and will make a crop even when growing out of broken rock, as I have seen in the Cevennes and the Pyrenees. There are two principle types, Giant and Common. Giant is a biennial and has limited commercial use; Common is perennial, very persistent and is as high yielding as the short-lived Giant. Sainfoin was introduced to Britain in the 17th century. However, there is a native wild form that grows on Salisbury Plain and a few other areas. It is inevitable that the cultivated crop will have acquired characteristics from our native type by cross pollination. There were 7 recognised Landrace varieties of Common Sainfoin, these included Cotswold, Cambridge, Vale of Glamorgan and Hampshire. Cotswold and Hampshire are the only ones currently being cultivated, but I would be most interested to learn if

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anyone in the Vale of Glamorgan knows of Sainfoin growing in their area.

There are several hundred acres of pasture incorporating Sainfoin here and even in the worst period of drought, it was green and lush, sustained by its deep roots, whilst the grass around was shrivelled and burnt.

To grow such a special crop is a privilege and an enjoyment. I anticipate the gaudy fields of pink flowers and the myriad butterflies and other invertebrates that flock to them. I enjoy watching the cows selectively grazing off the sainfoin before all else in the field. This is proof enough of its palatability. The shine on their coats demonstrates its health-giving characteristics. Sainfoin is best established by under-sowing Spring Barley. A seed rate of around 50 pounds per acre with 12 pounds of a mix of Meadow Fescue and Timothy will suffice. This may seem expensive but once the crop is established, it is easy to take your own seed and thus maintain and increase your acreage.

As these leguminous leys age, nitrogen accumulates in the form of roots and organic matter. A hay or silage crop can be removed and there will still be adequate organically derived nitrogen available to grow a good crop of wheat.

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