



Autumn (May) 2008, 1pp.

FEED PREFERENCE

By Andy Cowan

Last issue I mentioned the costs of making hay and silage. In the past, I have used a lot of silage and hay that we cut on our farm – up to 1,000 bales a year. The main reason we made silage was that I could store it out in the weather and did not need a shed to maintain its quality for long periods. I also believed that, as Jim Moir pointed out at the recent AGM, it was more palatable to the deer.

The increased cost of fodder in recent years has forced me to assess the real value of different feed options. I need to get better value from the excess grass available late in the year. There are a couple of reasons why silage is a good investment. Firstly, as a pasture management tool. If the ground is dry enough in my area to cope with large machinery in October, silage is an excellent option because it is still too difficult to dry the pasture for hay. Depending on the moisture content you want, you may be able to cut your silage and be off the paddock in one day. This is ideal, but more than likely it may take two days. The weather may be fickle at this time of year, but it is not that much of a concern if the job is completed in two days. To make hay at this time of year, given the unpredictability of the weather, may take weeks and a lot of extra workings (read money) if you get it wrong.

This is where Jim's notion of palatability comes into its own. The first cut of virtually any pasture-based fodder will contain a lot of annual grasses that grow and go to seed quickly. They are quickly becoming less palatable. The best way to make them more palatable is to ensile them. The assumption here is that whatever you first cut is not going to be fantastic quality. Of course, it would be more beneficial for your animals and bank accounts if we could all cut good quality fodder all the time. I have found that for the lower quality cuts, deer will waste less silage than hay. Then, to satisfy yourself, all you have to consider is – does the wastage of each product compare favourably with the cost of the product. The big plus of curting early is that you still have plenty of moisture in the soil and the option of making hay (or silage) and/or grazing animals on the new growth later in the year.

My belief is that early cut silage is great (haven't mentioned a pit silage – which is better and cheaper still), but good quality hay will be just as palatable as good quality silage. It is therefore much more cost effective while being just as nutritious as silage.

(images omitted)