

Sheep grazing to control black grass

The Organic Research Centre has been carrying out on-farm field trials to examine non-chemical methods to control black grass, such as sowing timings and grazing a wheat crop with sheep. These methods may form part of an integrated approach to managing black grass.

Black grass and sheep grazing

Black grass is an annual grass weed which has become increasingly problematic on both organic and non-organic farms in the UK. Conventional control options in winter crops, such as post emergence herbicides are becoming less effective as the weed has evolved resistance and become more prevalent in farming systems dominated by winter-sown wheat. Because of this farmers are looking at alternative cultural control methods such as delayed drilling and crop competition.

John Pawsey at Shimpling Park Farm has recently reintroduced sheep into his rotation, partly to help deal with a persistent black grass problem. This will allow the fertility building ley phase to be extended whilst grazing with sheep to help control seed return.

ORC trials

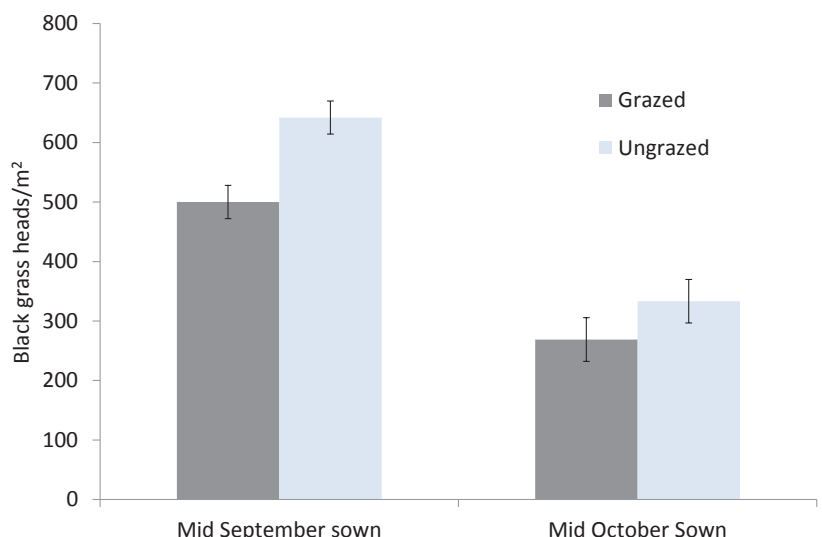
Trials funded by the Duchy Future Farming Programme are looking at how sheep can be used to graze a winter wheat crop in the spring and if this will help reduce black grass later in the year. This method can provide green fodder for livestock in the early spring and should not reduce the cereal crop yield if grazing is completed before stem extension (growth stage 31).

This practice of sheep grazing has become less common with fewer small mixed farms but is being revisited as an additional benefit of including livestock in an organic rotation.

Results so far

The first year of trials have found, as expected, a significant reduction in black grass head numbers in the later sown crop and to a lesser degree in grazed plots.

Grazing has also reduced the height and canopy cover of the wheat crop which may or may not go on to reduce grain yield.





Plot photos taken on 13th May

Cultural controls

More information on other cultural methods to control of black grass is available from HGCA Information Sheet 30 – Black-grass: solutions to the problem: (<http://cereals.ahdb.org.uk/media/433525/is30-black-grass-solutions-to-the-problem.pdf>)

Cultural control	% Control of black grass
Ploughing	69%
Delayed autumn drilling (later than mid-October)	>31%
Competitive crops (higher seeds rates, competitive crop species and varieties)	22–26%
Spring cropping (80% black emergence in autumn)	88%
Fallowing/grass ley (control is best if black grass plants are prevented from seeding by mowing or grazing)	70-80% reduction in seed-bank per year

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