Forage crops for dairy

The importance of forage crops

This fact sheet is part of the Profitable Dairying series - *Good business management reduces greenhouse gas emissions.*

The Australian dairy industry has committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions intensity (emissions per L milk produced) by 30% by 2020.

High quality feed all year round is the key to maximising milk production, thereby reducing emissions intensity.

Forage crops have an important role to fill feed gaps. Planning and preparation makes the difference for a successful forage crop.

High quality feed all year round

Changing seasons and increasing climate variability means dairy farmers are needing to consider more options for year round quality feed.

Brassica forage crops are currently grown on about 70% of dryland dairy farms in Australia's major dairying regions.

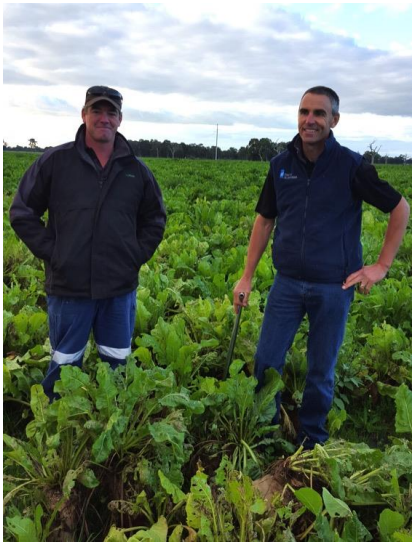
Turnips (*Brassica rapa*) are one of the main Brassica forage crops grown due to their high potential for growth during summer and exceptional nutritive value for dairy cows.

4-way forage mix grown on Victor Rodwell's farm in West Australia to fill autumn feed gap - brassica, oats, chicory, rye grass mix.

Researching the options

The Australian dairy industry is underpinned by perennial ryegrass. Project 3030 found that understanding the fundamentals of perennial ryegrass management was the most reliable path to increased farm profits. Increasing climate variability means that alternate homegrown feeds will have an important role to play - on dryland farms and in situations where temperatures over 28°C limit the growth of perennial rye grass. The Dairy Australia forage and crops webpage provides details on system fits for a range of forage crops:

- chicory
- tall fescue
- winter cereals
- millet and sorghum
- turnips
- regrowth brassicas
- perennial legumes



Inspecting forage crops in SA and WA. Chicory (*left*) has a deep taproot and is a good option for drier regions. Sugar beet (*right*) is a high energy feed for autumn feed gaps in WA.

"The cows practically gallop to the new break".

Victor Rodwell, farming at Boyanup, WA.

"We have a dryland farm so we are always thinking forward 'When will we need the feed?' and then working back from that. Good forage crops need planning and attention to detail at crop establishment."

Graeme Nicoll, farming at Fish Creek, Gippsland.

Good agronomy

Forage crops need planning, good crop establishment and good agronomy for maximum yields. Controlling slugs, red-legged earth mites and weeds is important to ensure the cows get the best possible feed. Forage Max is a relatively new herbicide registered for weed control in brassica forage crops.

It pays to understand what varieties are performing well locally and what agronomic issues are being addressed on different farms. A good agronomist can help maximize the returns from forage crops.

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Dairy Australia Limited ABN 60 105 227 987
Level 5, IBM Centre
60 City Road, Southbank VIC 3006 Australia
T + 61 3 9694 3777 F + 61 3 9694 3701
E enquiries@dairyaustralia.com.au
dairyaustralia.com.au

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