

# The Weatherproof Farm in Wales

Practical ways to improve soil, pasture,  
and productivity on your farm



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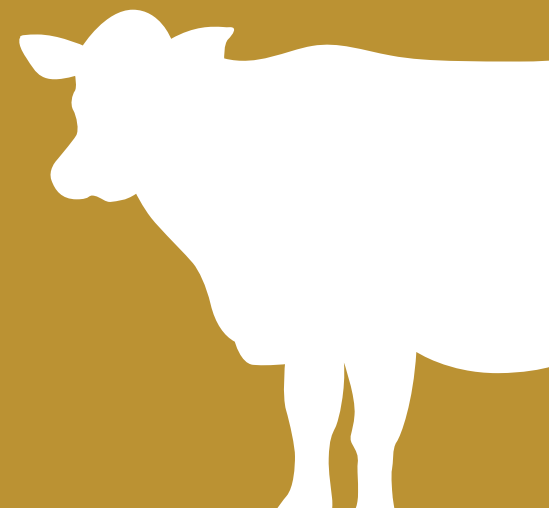
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# Introduction

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**Farming in Wales isn't getting any easier. Winters are wetter, summers drier, costs keep climbing, and margins get tighter. Fields poach, grass burns off, silage cuts are delayed, and livestock bills creep up. Sound familiar?**

The good news is that most of these problems come back to one thing: soil health. When soils are in poor shape, they can't handle the weather. They don't grow enough grass and they cost you money.

When soils are healthy, they drain better in winter, hold moisture in summer, grow more forage, and support healthier livestock.

This booklet is a practical guide to fixing your soils. Inside you'll find:

- ◆ How to test and understand your soil health
- ◆ What poor soils look like in summer and winter
- ◆ The real costs of poor soils and the gains from improving them
- ◆ Solutions to help rebuild your soil health

If you want to house stock for fewer weeks, stop losing grass to drought, grow more forage with less fertiliser, and reduce the stress of unpredictable weather, then read on.



# 1. How to test soil health

You can check the condition of your soil using two simple tests, both of which can be done at any time of the year:

- The spade test to assess your soil structure
- The infiltration test to assess how well water penetrates the soil

## Spade test

What you'll need: A spade and a tray (or board) to place the samples on.

### 1. Extract sample

Push the spade as deep as you can into an area in the middle of your field. Cut around all four sides, and lift out the soil block.

### 2. Open it up

Place the sample on its side. Kneel down, reach underneath with one hand, and support it with the other hand (or a knee). Gently lever it apart from underneath, like opening a book. Tear it cleanly in half so you can see the soil profile.



### 3. Place on tray

Carefully put one half on your tray for assessment. Avoid breaking it up further.

### 4. Take a reference sample

Do the same test in an undisturbed spot at the boundary or just outside the field – by a hedge, fence line, or verge. Place both samples side by side. This gives you a benchmark to compare against.



▲ In-field sample (left) and reference/boundary sample (right).

## Infiltration test

**What you'll need:** Infiltration ring (a steel tube 7.5 cm / 3 inches wide), hammer, wooden driving block, measuring bottle (min. 107ml), water and a timer.

### 1. Choose your spot

Pick an area 20-30m into the field, away from gateways, tracks or other areas with regular livestock traffic.

### 2. Insert the ring

Drive the ring 7.5cm / 3 inches into the soil using the hammer and block.



### 3. Add water

Fill the measuring bottle to the 107ml mark and pour the water steadily into the ring.



### 4. Time it

Start the stopwatch as soon as the water is poured. Stop when the surface just glistens with water.

### 5. Repeat

Do the same test in an undisturbed spot just outside the field, for example at the base of a hedge, on a verge, or in an area that hasn't been grazed, cut, or trampled.

## 2. Recognising healthy soil

The best way to judge soil health is to look at its structure. A quick spade test will tell you a lot, and the infiltration tests will usually back it up. To get a clear picture, always compare your field sample (left in the image below) with the reference sample from your boundary location (right).



▲ Compacted/poor soil (left) vs aggregated/healthy soil (right).

### What good vs poor soil health looks like (same soil type)

#### Good soil health

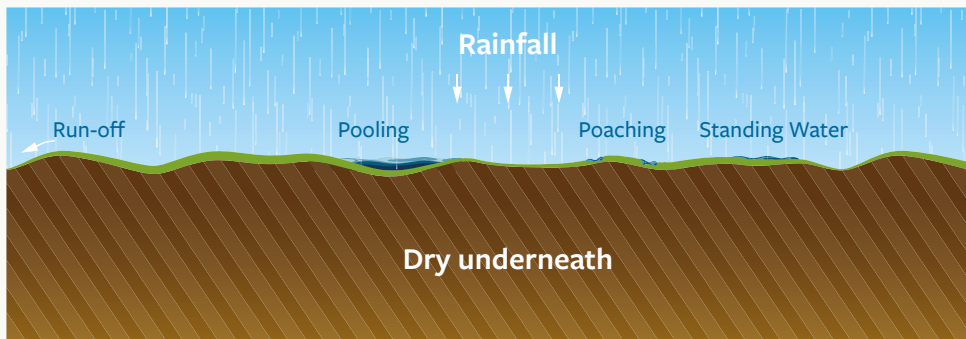
- ◆ Structure: Loose, crumbly, like a sponge. Technical term: *aggregated*
- ◆ Spade test: Light, easy to dig (once past the roots)
- ◆ Roots: Deep, spreading freely through the soil
- ◆ Infiltration: Fast - water disappears in seconds or a few minutes

#### Poor soil health

- ◆ Structure: Dense and blocky. Breaks into slabs with smooth, angular faces. Technical term: *compaction*
- ◆ Spade test: Heavy, hard to dig. Spade struggles to go in
- ◆ Roots: Shallow, limited to the surface
- ◆ Infiltration: Very slow - water may take many minutes or even hours to soak in

### 3. Wet on top, dry underneath

Poor soil has a blocky, solid structure (compacted). This means that when it rains, water can't get into the soil, so it sits on the surface or runs off. If you see standing water, poached areas or water gathering in low spots, it's usually a sign of compaction, not saturated soil.



▲ Interactions between water and unhealthy soil.

#### Compaction and rain

Compacted soils can't take water in, so rain stays on the surface or runs off. As this water moves downhill, it pools in low spots or hollows - a clear sign that the ground above is compacted.



▲ Pooling water.

#### Spade test

Compacted soils don't let water in, so spade samples show dry conditions even while the surface looks wet. Lower layers have a matte appearance, compared to the glossy/wet surface.



▲ Standing water.

## 4. Poor soil health in pasture during wet winters

When rain can't infiltrate, it sits on the surface, leaving fields wet and increasing the risk of poaching.

### The consequences:

- ◆ Shorter grazing season
- ◆ Longer housing periods for cattle
- ◆ Reduced sheep performance
- ◆ Higher overall production costs

### Winter issues:

- ◆ Animal health issues, including bad feet and foot rot
- ◆ Wet fields make feeding, lambing and moving stock harder
- ◆ Difficulty maintaining livestock target Body Condition Score
- ◆ Grazing short grass will increase the likelihood of parasite consumption

Wet winter fields are not just due to soil type or rainfall. Healthy soil drains better and reduces winter challenges.



▲ Poaching.



▲ Longer winter housing increases costs.



▲ Standing water.



## 5. Poor soil health - Weeds and liming

**Do you want to reduce weeds and liming costs on your farm? Healthy soil is the key.**

Poor, compacted soils have poor air flow. Without enough air (no aeration), soils become oxygen-poor and more acidic ('sour'), which allows docks, rushes, moss, and thistles to thrive.

### Rushes

Rushes thrive in soils with poor aeration because they can move air from their leaves to their roots. They indicate compacted or waterlogged soils and their presence shows that the health of the soil needs improving.

- Rushes thrive in unhealthy soils.



## Thistles and docks

With their tough roots, thistles and docks do well in compacted soils. Controlling them costs money and time, and most chemical controls harm soil health, making the problem worse. The best approach is to improve soil health.



## Soils going sour

Blocky soils are badly aerated / have little air. Over time, they acidify (lower pH), reducing nutrient availability and productivity. Lime is then needed to correct the pH, increasing costs and limiting stocking or growth rates.



## 6. Poor soil health in pasture during summer

### Would you like to grow more grass when it's hot?

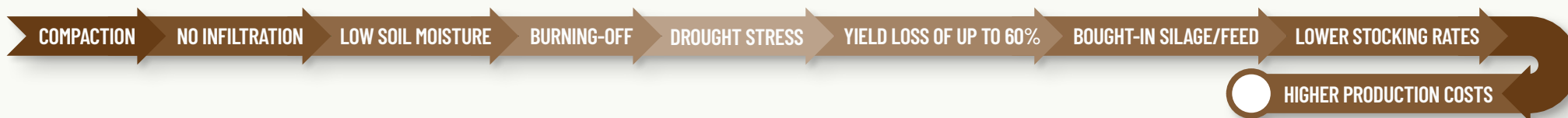
If your soil is compacted, winter rain doesn't soak in and soil is left dry. So, when the sun comes out:

- ◆ Grass stops growing quickly
- ◆ Pastures burn off (especially on banks or light land)
- ◆ Drought stress hits sooner



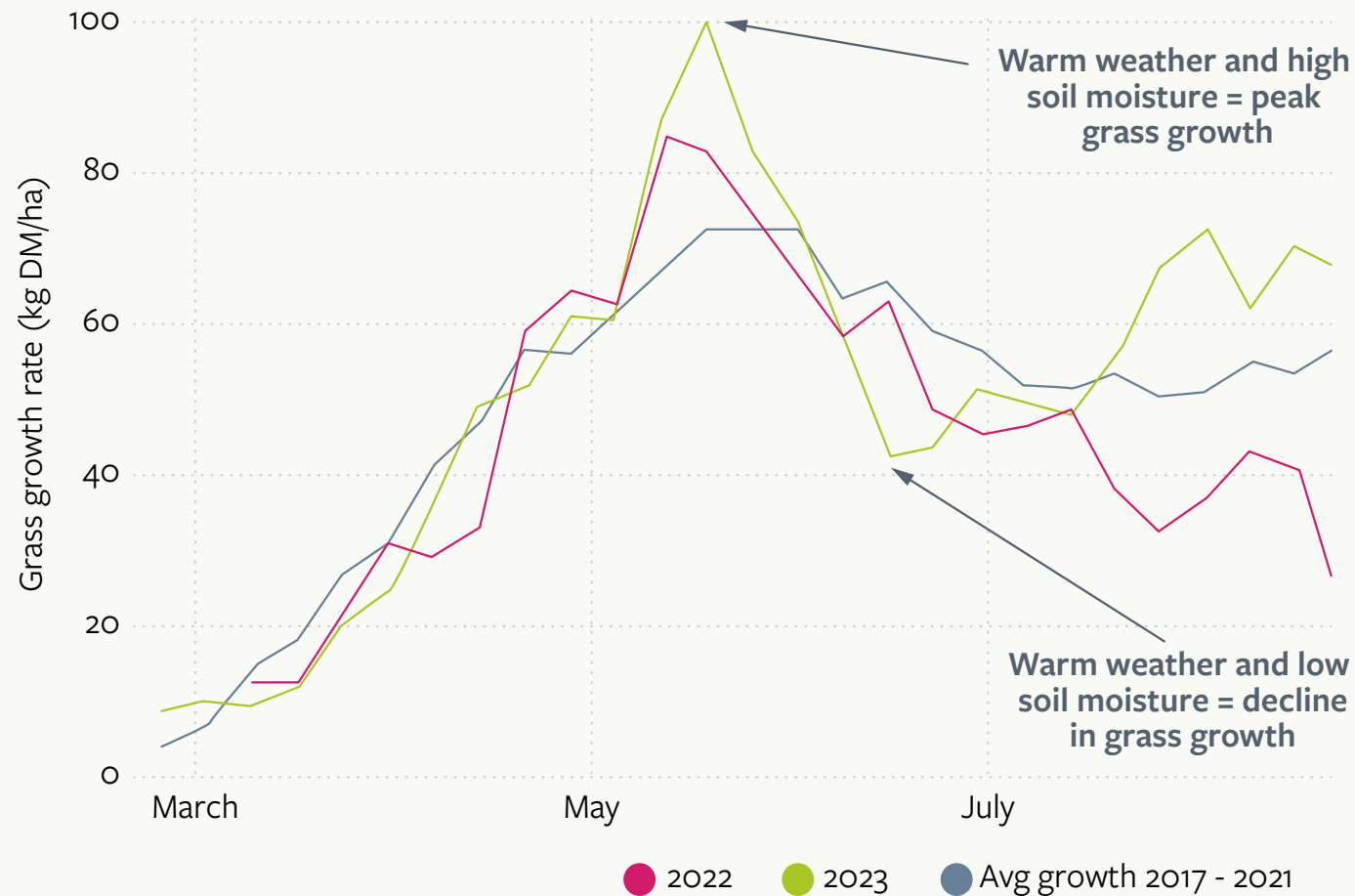
▲ Grass turning yellow and dying off due to a lack of moisture.

Burning off and drought stress reduce grass production, leading to bought-in feed or the need to destock. All of this increases the cost of production and reduces farm income. The real culprit is a lack of soil moisture – it's what holds back productivity during dry spells, which are becoming more frequent than ever.



## Seasonal grass growth data

This graph shows how grass growth peaked in May 2023, thanks to optimal growing conditions, specifically favourable warm weather and sufficient soil moisture. In contrast, June 2023 was extremely hot and, in many areas, very dry. The lack of soil moisture put pastures under stress, so even though it was warm, grass growth dropped sharply.



▲ Seasonal grass growth data from [ahdb.org.uk](http://ahdb.org.uk) 'Forage for knowledge'.

## 7. Healthy soil is aggregated

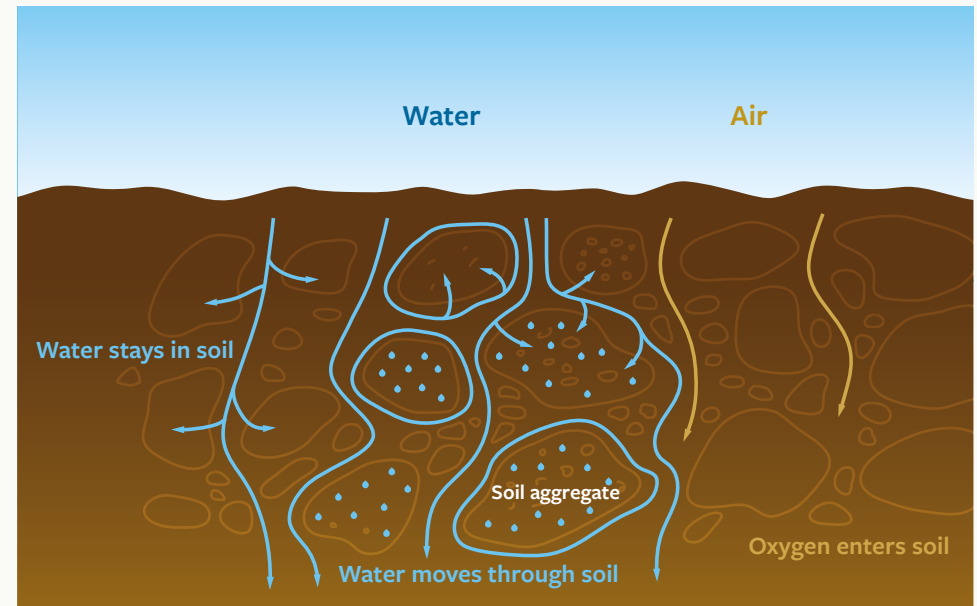
Healthy soil has a crumbly, loose and spongy structure referred to as an 'aggregated' structure. Aggregated soils drain well, retain moisture and allow good aeration.

### Why aggregation matters

- Allows interaction with air and water
- Water is held in the soil
- Water can move through the soil
- Oxygen can penetrate the soil

### Moisture retention

Aggregated soil is like a sponge. Water soaks into the soil and is stored for dry periods. This makes land more resistant to burning off and drought, and helps to maintain grass growth in hot summers.



▲ Interactions between air, water and healthy soil.

MOISTURE-RETENTIVE (STORES WINTER RAINS)

NO BURNING-OFF/NO DROUGHT + HIGHER GRASS YIELDS IN HOT SUMMERS

HIGHER STOCKING RATES + LESS BOUGHT-IN FEED

## Aeration

An open soil structure lets air move freely in and out of the soil. This prevents weeds like rushes and docks from taking hold.



## Free draining

Good aggregation means water moves through the soil easily, preventing waterlogging and poaching.



## 8. Roots build healthy soil

Roots do more than feed plants – they create soil structure. Dense, intermingling roots form a ‘turf’ or ‘mat’, which builds crumbly, aggregated soil. Where roots are shallow, sparse or absent, soils remain blocky and compacted.

### Measuring rooting depth and mass

Root mass in the turf (which contains about 80% of the roots) determines the depth and degree of aggregation. Typically, root depth is just 5cm / 2 inches, and below that, soils are blocky.

Shallow rooting is a major cause of compaction in pasture, resulting in poor winter ground conditions and burning off in summer due to limited water infiltration.

Other causes of shallow turfs are gaps in swards, bent grasses, and mosses.

► The ‘turf’ layer is usually around 5cm / 2 inches.



## Gappy sward

Gappy swards mean gaps in the turf, leaving blocky structures all the way to the surface. In contrast, where the sward is dense, blocky structures are mostly found lower down.



## Bent grasses

Bent grasses grow low to the ground and spread by runners, with very shallow roots. When they make up a large part of the sward, they create a tight, blocky soil structure and crowd out more productive, palatable species. This can lead to higher production costs or lower stocking rates.



## Mosses

Mosses have no true roots. That's why they would rather grow on rocks or roofs. Where moss is common in pasture, it's a sign of compacted, poorly aerated soil. Moss also provides no feed for livestock, so its presence signals reduced productivity and increased production costs.



## 9. Manage grazing, grow roots, improve soil health

Grazing management is one of the most effective ways to rebuild roots, improve soils and grow more grass.

### Conventional grazing

In conventional grazing systems, animals stay in the same pasture for extended periods. This means they can keep coming back to bite off new regrowth from plants that were grazed only a few days earlier.

Stock will always prefer these tender, new shoots, and reject older plants. But grazing regrowth before a plant has fully recovered weakens the plant. Over time, plants become stunted, root systems shrink and the pasture declines.



▲ The difference between conventional and rotational grazing on root systems.

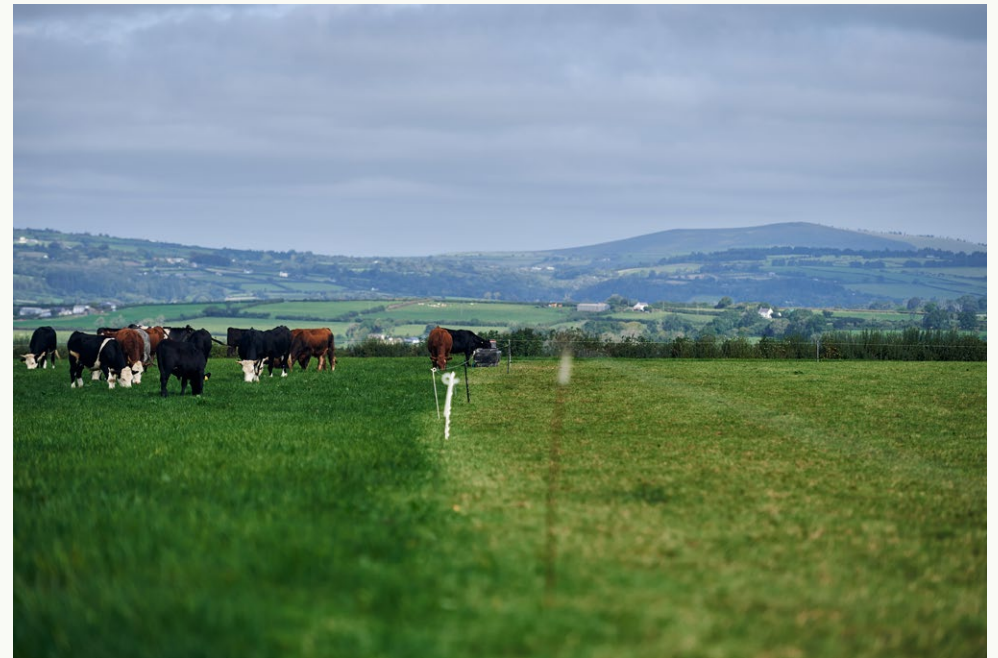


## Mob or rotational grazing

With mob or rotational grazing, sheep or cattle are moved frequently onto fresh grass. This gives the pasture time to fully recover between grazing, allowing plants to rebuild their root energy reserves before being grazed again. Full recovery means plants are stronger, more productive and develop deeper root systems. Bigger roots build healthier soils. And the best part? Resting pasture is free.



▲ Plants become stunted in conventional grazing systems.



▲ Cows in a rotational paddock grazing system.

## 10. How grazing shapes the soil - The rainfall simulator

This photo shows a rainfall simulator demonstrating how three different grazing practices affect the same soil type:

1 = Conventional grazing

2 = Mob/rotational grazing

3 = Tall-grass grazing

Each tray receives the same amount of water (around 5cm / 2 inches in 20 minutes). Water that infiltrates the soil collects in the back row of tubs; anything that doesn't infiltrate, ends up in the run-off tubs in the front row. The experiment shows how grazing management changes soil structure, and therefore whether rain infiltrates, runs off, or is stored in the soil. What does it tell us?

### 1. Conventional grazing

Conventional grazing results in shallow roots and blocky soil, which reduces water infiltration. In the simulator, much of the water runs off rather than soaking in, showing poor soil structure (Tub B). Less water in the soil means standing water on the surface, wet fields, and longer housing periods for livestock. In summer, dry periods reduce grass growth and silage quality. The browner colour of the run-off also shows greater soil and nutrient loss.

### 2. Mob or rotational grazing

Mob or rotational grazing improves water infiltration and water quality. In the simulator, the run-off from rotationally grazed soil is noticeably clearer, showing reduced soil loss, better structure, and less nutrient wash-off (Tub C).

### 3. Tall-grass grazing

Tall-grass grazing is similar to rotational grazing, but with longer rest periods between grazing, as appropriate. While not a one-size-fits-all approach, tall-grass grazing demonstrates how grazing management can improve infiltration. Leaving plants longer between grazing periods allows water to soak into the soil rather than running off.

In the rainfall simulator, more water ends up in the collection tub for infiltration (Tub D), showing improved moisture retention, due to improved soil structure (see diagram below).





▲ Set-up 1 = conventional grazing; set-up 2 = mob/rotational grazing; set-up 3 = tall-grass grazing.

## 11. Solutions

**The good news is that soil health can be restored. Practical, low-cost changes can rebuild soil structure, improve infiltration, and boost productivity.**

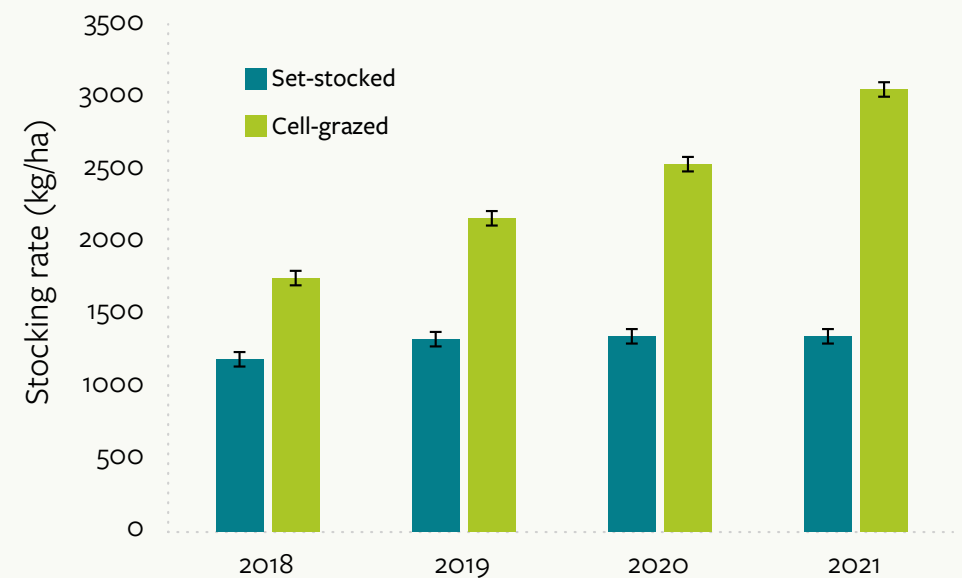
Five key solutions - grazing management, plant diversity, agroforestry, targeted mechanical interventions, and mineral applications - show how working with nature, alongside smart soil treatments, delivers healthier soils and more resilient farming systems.

### a. Grazing management

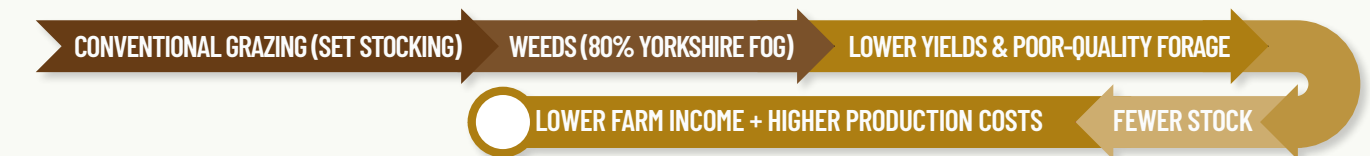
Grazing management is one of the simplest and most effective ways to improve soil health, pasture productivity, and farm performance. This photo shows a ryegrass ley at the end of a trial at Rothamsted North Wyke in North Devon. The four-year trial used dairy-cross cattle finished at two years on newly established ryegrass leys. Results showed that moving animals daily onto fresh grass doubled stocking rates, maintained similar growth rates and added 28 extra days at grass.



Even on its own, changing grazing management led to significant production improvements: fewer weeds, more productive grasses (compared with 80% Yorkshire Fog), lower costs, and maintained growth rates.



▲ Stocking rates across grazing types. Credit: Rothamsted Research (2021).



◀ Same soil, same ley at project end. Credit: Rothamsted Research (2021).

## b. Building soil life through plant diversity

Diverse swards, both permanent and temporary, build stronger, more varied root architectures, leading to improvements in soil structure. Furthermore, the inclusion of nitrogen-fixing species naturally enriches the soil, reducing or even eliminating the reliance on artificial fertilisers. Diverse pastures can also reduce the need for anthelmintic drugs (e.g. wormers) by naturally controlling parasites.

Multiple studies show that increasing plant diversity in pasture boosts forage yields while maintaining forage quality. Diverse swards improve soil health, cut fertiliser use, and support higher livestock performance - all contributing to stronger farm returns.

- A farm trial in Northern Ireland demonstrated that finishing lambs on herbal leys reduced the finishing period by an average of 27 days, compared with traditional swards.<sup>1</sup>

- A two-year Irish grazing study reported that ewes grazing multi-species swards achieved better live weights and body condition and required less worming than those on perennial ryegrass swards.<sup>2</sup>
- Another study showed that multi-species swards receiving zero nitrogen can match or exceed the forage yields of a single-species perennial ryegrass sward receiving 300kg/ha of nitrogen.<sup>3</sup>
- Cows grazing multi-species swards have also produced higher milk yields (5,297kg and 476kg milk solids per lactation) compared with cows on perennial rye grass-only swards (5,018kg milk and 452kg milk solids).<sup>4</sup>

These benefits are greatest when diversity is combined with good grazing management. Rotational or mob grazing protects deeper-rooting herbs and legumes from being selectively overgrazed and lost from the sward.



▲ Cattle grazing at Pentrefelin, Denbighshire.

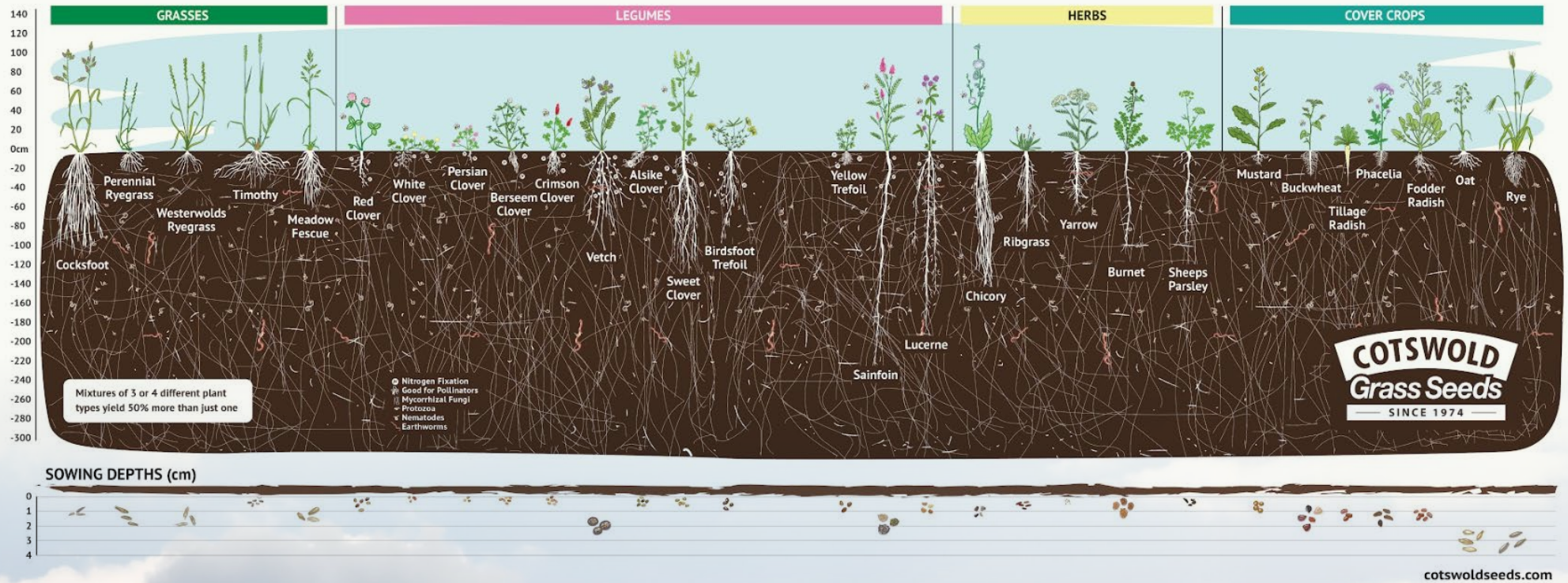
<sup>1</sup> Herbal leys performing well on County Down farm (DAERA, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> Grazing multi-species swards improves ewe and lamb performance (Grace et al., 2019)

<sup>3</sup> Yield of binary and multi-species swards relative to single-species swards in intensive silage systems (Moloney et al., 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Multi-species swards and reduced nitrogen: A win-win for dairy farming (Teagasc, 2025)

## Plants for soil fertility



▲ A diversity of plants, and therefore rooting depths/structures, improves soil health. Credit: Cotswold Seeds.



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## Case study

Farmer: **Dafydd Owen**

Farm: **Coed Coch Farms Ltd, Abergele**

Type: **Upland and lowland sheep farm**

Size: **400 hectares**

“We farm around 2,000 Romney ewes, breeding our own replacements using only grass, with no fertiliser or supplementary feed, on a rotational grazing system.

We’ve established around 100 acres of herbal leys, mainly for fattening lambs after weaning. The biggest benefit of herbal leys is greater resilience to drought. During dry summers, deeper-rooting plants like plantain and chicory continue to thrive even as the grass growth slows.

The species diversity gives the sward varying heights, and with longer grazing rotations, many plants are allowed to flower and go to seed.

With climate change, long wet periods are often followed by long dry periods. Deep roots and diverse swards help the pasture access soil moisture and maintain cover all year round, so there’s always something growing, whatever the weather.”

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## Case study

Farmer: **Rhodri Lloyd-Williams**

Farm: **Moelgolomen Farm, Talybont, North Ceredigion**

Type: **Upland hill sheep farm**

Size: **750 acres**

“On our organic farm, we introduced rotational grazing on our lower fields, subdividing the farm into smaller paddocks and moving stock through them. This gives the plants more opportunity to grow, flower and set seed, increasing overall plant diversity.

We aim to let the seed bank regenerate naturally, but last year we sowed a herbal ley mix on a field that was struggling. We also scratched up soil in our silage fields and broadcast seeds on top. This opened the sward, and the seeds did well. I’m happy to experiment with different approaches to see what works.

Overall, we see better growth and deeper roots. By mid to late summer, we’ve built up a solid wedge of grass, whereas previously, with set stocking, it would have been grazed down to the roots. Summer growth rates for lambs have improved, thanks to the diverse swards. We’ve also halved our bill for bought-in sheep feed, helping bring input costs down so that lamb sales translate into more profit.”

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## c. Agroforestry

Agroforestry means integrating trees with livestock, forage and crops through hedgerows, in-field trees, tree rows, riparian corridors or small woodland blocks. Trees help build better soil structure by improving aggregation and crumb formation, reducing compaction, and allowing air and water to move more freely through the soil.



Acting as ‘living land drains’, their roots improve infiltration and help dry out wetter ground, reducing the conditions that favour rushes and other undesirable species. Trees can also lift nutrients from deeper layers, making them available to grasses and forage crops.

### Benefits of agroforestry for farm productivity:

- ◆ Reduce lamb losses by up to 30%<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ Boosts grass growth in dry periods by lowering evaporation. This Improves grass yield by up to 30% in dry springs<sup>6</sup>

- ◆ Provides biomass for coppicing into wood fuel or animal bedding. Coppice biomass yield from willow: 3m<sup>3</sup> per 100m of row per year
- ◆ Helps build resilience and maintain productivity year-round
- ◆ Reduces heat stress in livestock by providing essential shade<sup>7</sup>



▲ Growing willow for biomass.

### Silvopasture

Silvopasture is a form of agroforestry that involves planting rows of fast-growing trees alongside pasture.

Silvopasture works best with double or triple rows of trees planted in narrow strips (1-2m wide), separated by wide open areas (or alleys) for grazing or forage production.

Rows should be oriented north-south or along the long axis of the field to make field operations more efficient.

Tree rows should not directly connect to the field boundary, leaving generous headland for machinery access and hay or silage making.

Temporary two- to three-strand electric fencing is usually all that is needed, saving time and costs.



▲ The early stages of a new agroforestry system.

### Tree browse

Tree strips also provide valuable browse: a high-protein, energy-rich supplement that boosts stock performance, especially during dry spells or shoulder seasons.

### Natural drains

Tree roots act as natural drains, opening up soil structure and improving infiltration. Trials at Pontbren in Mid Wales showed infiltration was 60 times greater under tree strips compared with open pasture.<sup>8</sup> This drainage effect helps dry out wetter ground, suppresses rushes, and supports stronger, more resilient grass growth.

<sup>5</sup> The role of trees in sheep farming (The Woodland Trust, date unknown)

<sup>6</sup> Pasture production and evaluation in a lowland and hill area in North Wales (Alcock, 1973)

<sup>7</sup> Why planting more trees could protect milk yields (Farming Connect, 2025)

<sup>8</sup> Can tree shelterbelts on agricultural land reduce flood risk? (Carroll et al., 2006)

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## Case study

Farmers: **Huw and Claire Morgan**

Farm: **Pwlllyrhwyiaid, Talybont on Usk, Powys**

Type: **Suckler cows and sheep hill farm**

Size: **450 acres (half rented, half owned)**

“Around 20% of our farm (~90 acres) is covered in trees, including 30 acres of ancient woodland and scattered woodland blocks. All across the farm, hedgerows act as wildlife corridors.

We use a mix of hazel, blackthorn, whitethorn, dogrose, crab apple, maple, elder, and willow. That way, wildlife is provided with nuts and berries while our livestock can graze on plants with painkilling properties. The hedgerows’ deep roots bring up minerals from deeper soil and help slow water flow to the rivers at the bottom of the valley.

The trees and hedgerows provide vital shelter during hot weather and storms, allowing us to lamb earlier and sell our first lambs at better prices. We also use very little fertiliser on the pasture; autumn leaves and nutshells improve soil health naturally.

Seeing the greenery and seasonal colours of the trees is also beneficial for my mental health.”

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## d. Mechanical interventions

Mechanical interventions can help restore soil structure when conditions are right. Subsoilers and drum and blade units, used during an appropriate weather window, will relieve compaction, improve infiltration and aeration, and can increase grass yields.

### Grass subsoilers

Low-disturbance grass subsoilers work best when soils are friable enough to move: “if you’d cultivate, you can subsoil”. In good conditions, they create a light tilth along the rip line, helping roots to penetrate deeper and water to soak in. Use in late summer or early autumn, ideally before rain, to stop the soil drying out.



### Aerworx (drum and blade)

The Aerworx uses forward speed in dry conditions to create a shatter effect at depth. The drier the soil, the better it works, and it performs well even

on heavy or stony ground. Higher speeds increase the effect. This improves aeration and water movement with minimal surface disturbance.

## e. Mineral solutions

High-clay soils often have poor structure, which can get worse if magnesium levels are high. Magnesium sticks to clay particles, causing them to pack tightly. This creates

dense, sticky soil, leading to compaction, poor drainage and weak root growth.

Gypsum (calcium sulphate) can help by making the soil more open and porous. Apply a few tonnes per hectare, ideally in autumn, around three weeks before grazing, or well before/after any cultivation.

Gypsum loosens compacted soil.

### Jar test: A quick check for gypsum response

A simple jar test can show whether your soil is likely to benefit from gypsum. When gypsum works, clay particles ‘floculate’ - they join into heavier crumbs that settle faster, which reflects better soil structure.



How to do it:

1. Put a 2.5cm / 1inch lump of soil into two jars
2. Fill with deionised water and break the soil up with a fork
3. Add a small pinch of gypsum to one jar
4. Shake both jars and leave them to settle

If gypsum will help, the treated jar will clear more quickly, with more soil settling to the bottom. Cloudier, slower-settling water in the untreated jar suggests poorer structure.

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## Case study

Farmer: **Huw Foulkes**

Farm: **Pentrefelin, Denbighshire**

Type: **Livestock (dairy and beef)**

Size: **138 acres (98 owned, 40 rented)**

“For us, the most important part of mob grazing is the rest period we give each paddock - aiming for at least 60 to 90 days between grazing. This helps establish deeper-rooting plants. The cows get a fresh paddock each day, but the system is flexible: in spring and autumn, paddocks are bigger; in summer, smaller. I kept the milking herd outside for the whole of last year although they did come in to shelter during the worst weather events.

We’re seeing increased biodiversity and the soil looks healthier. Tests show water infiltration has improved a lot. We’ve become much more self-sufficient. Last year, for the first time, I fed the milking cows grass 365 days a year. We still do some bale grazing and silage, but bought-in feed and fertiliser costs no longer apply to us.

The cows are also milking better, so yields aren’t a problem. With this system, you’re not just growing grass to feed cows, you’re creating a whole ecosystem.”

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## About the Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN)

The NFFN is a farmer-led organisation helping farmers restore the balance between farming and nature.

We support farmers by sharing knowledge, resources, and case studies to boost food production, protect wildlife, and build climate resilience. We influence policy to secure fair rewards for farmers who protect nature, and connect like-minded farmers across the UK.

Our network is open to all - farmers, the public and organisations. Membership is free.

**[nffn.org.uk](https://nffn.org.uk)**

  /NFFNUK

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Photo credit: Dafydd Owen, Huw Foulkes, Huw Morgan, Rhodri Lloyd-Williams, Sorcha Lewis, WWF / Aled Llywelyn