

Feature

Covering all eventualities

Sophia Gallia asks some keepers what cover crops work for them.

THERE IS A BAFFLING ARRAY OF COVER CROPS on the market, some mixes and some single varieties. Probably the most popular among keepers is straight maize. Given enough goodness in the way of fertiliser, it is quite easy to grow, and it provides a good food source and cover.

OH FOR THE LOVE OF MAIZE

Tim Dicks, a keeper on the Belvoir Estate in Lincolnshire, says: “We grow maize for feed and holding. For the partridges

it’s cover and food; for the pheasants it’s food and for drawing. We used to grow sorghum with maize in alternate strips, but this year we just grew maize, which does well here. We grow maize in quite big areas, so it’s important to swipe rides for the partridges, otherwise they tend to sit on the edge of the crop and we want them living in it.”

Eddy Graves in Gloucestershire also grows maize: “We used to grow sorghum with the maize but we got weed problems

so went back to pure maize to clean it up.”

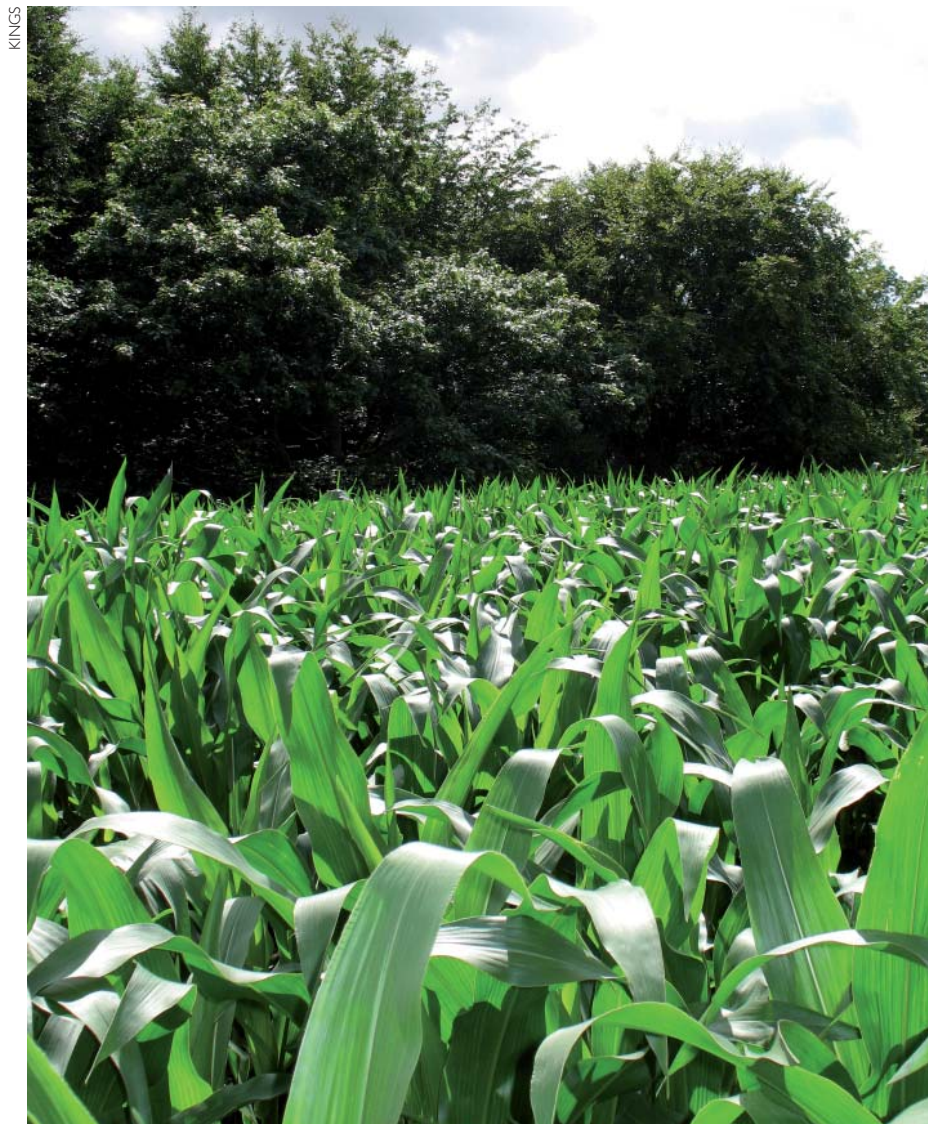
Dave Wiggins, a keeper in Berkshire has maize and sorghum plots, mainly to create drives and holding cover, for running strips and to increase the width of wood belts. As he explains: “We use maize and dwarf sorghum drilled in strips; five rows of maize at 30” rows and then five rows of sorghum at 15” rows alternating through out the whole plot and drilled in one pass. This has always worked well for me. This is my first season on this estate and I have inherited invasive millet in every plot, so straight maize will have to be grown for at least three years until the problem is sorted out.”

Mike Swan of the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) explains why lots of keepers are back to pure maize: “It’s because of grass weed problems. Bristle grass and barnyard grass are in effect wild millets. They are very prolific and apt to choke cover plots. They are still on the increase and are very hard to kill in sorghum, but there are some herbicides that will kill or at least heavily check them to which some maize varieties are resistant.”

PROBLEMS WITH MAIZE

Despite its popularity, there are downsides to pure maize! As Peter Thompson, also of the GWCT, explains: “Maize is grown because it goes in and is sprayed with herbicide and that is that. But it is boring!” Another problem is that maize is contributing to an increase in rat numbers, which congregate around maize plots. Badgers also love maize, particularly the unripe cobs and can cause a lot of damage. Mike Swan comments: “Badgers will wreck a cover plot rather quickly, but often shoots are unviable without the maize cover plots.” He suggests growing increasingly popular cobless maize (late maturing varieties which are effectively barren in the UK) where badgers are a problem. “It still makes attractive driving cover, but is less bother with rats too,” he says. “My guess

Straight maize is very popular with keepers, but it does attract rats and badgers, and may even be responsible in part for the increase in numbers of those species.



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is that the ‘cobless’ varieties might get to this stage late enough in the year to be less attractive. I think that most of the trouble comes in dry summer weather when the badgers are short of alternative food. Kale and sorghum don’t seem to be affected.”

WHAT CAN BE GROWN FOR VARIETY?

Eddy has an idea: “We grow a bit of chickory and, in the long-term, we’re looking at miscanthus, but it’s expensive, so we’ll see.”

Dave favours something different: “Kale would be an option instead as the millet can be controlled in brassicas.”

In Shropshire, where Liam Bell is a keeper, kale works well as cover on the most exposed areas of the shoot (mostly above 900 metres). “Although maize is easy to establish, it can be cold and draughty; the kale provides warmth, but it needs to be good, ie. thigh level! We put on 600 weight per acre of compound fertiliser and top dress it if necessary. Every fifth year we put a maize/millet mix on the kale plots as a break crop and we use treated (anti-flea beetle) kale seed.”

Peter recommends a mix of things like kale, triticale and quinoa: “It’s harder to establish, but you can leave it for two years, which makes a big difference to costs.” He has some thoughts on what mixes to grow: “You could add sunflowers into the mix – pheasants love the seed, as do most of the farmland birds. Another idea is millet. Alternating strips of maize/sunflower and millet/linseed, for instance, will be excellent.” He suggests caution with going over the top on mixes, however: “The more things you put in the mix, the more difficult it is to control weeds.” He also warns against certain mixes if you’re hoping to get paid for a wild bird crop: “Maize and sorghum is not allowed in any new stewardship mix, so you would have to leave maize out.” Indeed, Defra’s ELS handbook states: “Large-seeded crops (such as maize) and game covers (such as giant sorghum or sweet clover) are not allowed.”

Commenting on sorghum specifically, Peter said: “I have been impressed by dwarf grain sorghum, which produces seed in most summers. Ask for an early seeding variety such as Milo – it’s only about knee height, but stands well through the winter and “supports” the other plants that have been sown with it. Dwarf grain sorghum, dwarf sunflowers and millet – now there is a good mix!”

TIPS ON GROWING

The general consensus is that cover crops should be treated as any commercially-grown arable crop. On Dave’s soil the cover crops are hungry: “Fertiliser and manure can’t be skimmed on.” He had tips for other keepers growing maize: “Be patient, let the conditions come right and the soil temperature get to 10°C and rising before you drill.” And if the farm sows and tends your cover crops, he advises: “Talk to tractor drivers and make sure they understand exactly what you require. On most shoots cover crops are too important to get it wrong.”

“Being 800 feet above sea level on stony soil, we need to use fertiliser to get our cover crops to work,” agrees Eddy.

Liam also has some tips: “I suggest you subsoil the cover crop plots and drill them in the direction of the flushing point in quite wide rows so the birds stay in the crop rather than on the edge. For kale, if the area is over an acre, use a swipe to cut feed rides. We plant maize and kale in May, when the soil has warmed up. We get the soil tested by an agronomist, especially for lime, and we look at the crops every day. If it looks off-colour we’ll get it sap-tested and put on whatever the agronomist advises.”

Weed and pest control can be difficult in mixes. Keeping on top of weeds obviously benefits the crop being grown, but it also helps reduce build-up of weeds in subsequent years. Spraying off existing weeds before cultivating, then allowing

them to germinate before zapping them again, and re-cultivating should provide a good starting point, but it may need to be done repeatedly. Before sowing, the seedbed should be a fine tilth. Only sow when conditions and soil temperature allow and use minimum disturbance to the seedbed when drilling.

Certain areas of farms are havens for pests. For example, small plots adjacent to hedges or woodland can harbour small pests such as slugs. They also attract larger ones like pigeons, rabbits and deer. Check your crops regularly and be ready to act with a deterrent to keep pests at bay.

The soil itself is also important. It should be aerated and have good structure. Often game plots are on difficult areas and see a fair amount of traffic, which can cause compaction and lead to poor soil structure. Ploughing gives a good base on which to cultivate. Subsoiling can also be beneficial in certain situations. Fertility should be kept up by using artificial fertilisers, organic or farmyard manure. The latter also improves soil structure. Although inputs are expensive, game crops struggle without them.

Finally, don’t be afraid to ask! Your local keepers may have tips that you may not have thought of. There are also a number of excellent game cover specialists, who not only sell the seed, but will advise on what to grow and how in your area. A number of them are advertising within these pages.

Kale grown well provides warmth, whereas maize can be cold and draughty and lasts for two years.

