



Tillering corn produced high yields of quality forage for dairyman Eli Weaver, Jr., left, shown examining a pure stand of the crop with King's Agriseeds' Dave Wilson.

Substitute Silage

Tillering BMR corn fills late-summer void

by Neil Tietz

Eli Weaver, Jr., knew he would run out of corn silage before this year's crop came in. So he planted a different type of corn in early June, then harvested nearly 20 tons/acre of high-quality bale silage 60 days later.

When the substitute silage replaced conventional corn silage in his milking ration, production held steady.

"You'd have never known I changed anything," says the Leola,

PA, dairyman.

Weaver grew MasterGraze, a tillering brown midrib (BMR) forage corn from Masters Choice, Inc., Anna, IL. The crop doesn't produce fully developed ears, but each plant has multiple stalks said to be high in sugars and very digestible. When harvested just before tasselling, it tests around 12% crude protein, but feeds better than that, says Vic Lutz, a Cincinnatus, NY, dairy nutritionist.

"We actually put it in rations at 16% protein because it's so digestible,"

according to Lutz.

Developed primarily as a pasture crop, MasterGraze is usually grazed in midsummer when cool-season grasses are unproductive, reports Dave Wilson. He's a research agronomist with King's Agriseeds, Ronks, PA, a Masters Choice distributor. Chopping it daily and feeding it as greenchop also works well, especially if plantings are staggered, Wilson adds.

But harvesting it for silage can be challenging, says Lutz. At optimum maturity, MasterGraze is too wet to chop direct. If left standing until it reaches full maturity and dries down, the low-lignin crop lodges, he says.

It can be baled or chopped after drying to silage moisture levels in windrows, but heavy haying equipment is needed, and the big windrows dry slowly.

"If you did a hay crop, you'd be dealing with maybe 6 or 7 tons per acre of wet material," Lutz points out. "When you mow this stuff, you're looking at three times the wet material."

He says some farmers quit growing the crop due to harvesting issues. "They were unhappy trying to handle it, but they were not unhappy trying to feed it."

Working with cooperating farmers, Lutz and Wilson are trying to identify better ways to grow and harvest the crop for silage. This year they planted it with short-season conventional hybrids, hoping the sturdier conventional corn would hold up the tillering corn until both were at harvestable moisture levels.

That worked better in central New York, where Lutz is located, than at Weaver's farm in southeastern Pennsylvania. At both locations, Masters Choice's earliest conventional hybrid – 80-82 days – matured too late to match MasterGraze's maturity.

Also, Weaver's dual-corn plot was damaged by diseases, a potential problem in most regions when the tillering corn is allowed to mature, Lutz warns. Growing MasterGraze and conventional corn together for

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silage is "a northern thing," he says. "It won't work going south."

"Other options include putting a short-season forage sorghum with it and cutting the forage sorghum at boot stage," says Wilson. The sorghum would help preserve forage yields in dry years, and the BMR corn would improve forage quality compared with forage sorghum grown alone, he figures.

He also plans to grow MasterGraze with vining-type soybeans

developed recently at South Dakota State University.

Weaver first grew MasterGraze a few years ago, planning to harvest it as silage. But the growing season turned dry and his pastures were short, so he grazed it. He removed supplemental protein from his ration when he moved the herd from sorghum-sudangrass to tillering corn, and milk production still went up by 5 lbs/cow/day.



Weaver's tillering corn-cowpea mixture, harvested as 62%-moisture bale silage, matched the milk yield of conventional corn silage.



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"It grazed well. They took the leaves off and the tops, and then they came back and took the stalks down to little nubs at the ground."

This year he planted cowpeas with it, hoping they would increase the silage protein and control weeds well enough so he wouldn't have to use herbicide. The silage tested only 11% protein, but the cowpeas "worked beautifully" for weed control, says Weaver. "I had no weeds at all."

He planted the crop after taking triticale silage off the field, then seeded the winter grain again after removing the MasterGraze-cowpea combination. In some situations, a third crop, such as oats for silage, would fit between the BMR corn harvest and fall seeding, says Lutz.

Weaver mowed and conditioned the combination crop in the morning, laying it in wide swaths. He tedded it that afternoon, raked it the following morning and baled at 62% moisture the second afternoon. Then he wrapped the big square bales in stretch-wrap plastic.

"I had no problems," he says. "The only thing is, if a farmer has lighter equipment, he might want to drive slower because of the amount of crop that's lying there."

He put the silage through a stationary grinder before feeding it, but that may not be necessary, says Weaver.

"I'm feeding some to my young-stock without grinding, and they eat pretty much everything."

He'll grow MasterGraze again if his corn silage inventory runs short. But next time he'll bale it at a slightly higher moisture level. Some of this year's bales were wetter than 62%, and the forage "seemed to feed a little bit more like corn silage." ♦