

Easy does it - transition tips from grass to brassicas

A sudden and major change of diet rarely works well with any livestock, and dairy cows going from grass to brassicas at this time of year are no different.

If you ease them into it gradually, however, most cows will make the transition smoothly. Allow at least 10 to 14 days, and follow these simple steps to make the result better for both you and your animals.

Don't allow 'empty' cows onto crop during the adaption period. Hungry cows, with nothing in their rumen, are likely to gorge themselves on brassicas. Fill your cows up first on pasture and/or silage, baleage, straw and/or hay for a couple of hours then let them onto the crop. This will minimise the risk of health problems, such as rumen acidosis, nitrate toxicity and choke.

Give cows low quantities of brassicas only for short periods of time for the first few days. Run cows onto the brassica crop for no more than one to two hours a day when first introducing them to the crop. Build up to the final per head/day brassica allocation by a maximum 1 kg DM/head/day over the next 10 days. Offer the balance of their diet as pasture, silage and/or hay or straw. Watch cows carefully during the first one to two hours of grazing for signs of bloat or nitrate toxicity.

Feed forage brassicas as only a portion of the daily diet. Brassicas should never be 100% of the winter ration for dry cows. An ideal mix of feeds once cows are adapted to brassicas is:

- 50-75% of the total daily diet as brassicas
- The balance as conserved feeds and/or runoff pasture

Additional trace elements like copper, selenium, iodine and magnesium may be required. Always provide plenty of clean water.

Some cows just don't like brassicas. Within a herd of cows, some will never fully adapt well to the crop and thus quickly lose Body Condition Score (BCS). These cows should be quickly identified, put into a separate mob and fed a non-brassica diet.

Transition back to grass prior to calving. Feeding pregnant stock brassicas too close to giving birth can lead to metabolic problems. Ideally, animals should be transitioned back to a grass based diet at least two weeks before giving birth.

