



Lamb Selection

In order to maximise the price you achieve for finished lambs, ensure you have considered the following:

- Know your market and what type of lambs are required – local butcher, supermarket or export market
- Handle and weigh lambs regularly to ensure they are not over spec
- Present lambs in the best condition possible to avoid deductions

Current payments are based on the EUROP grid (below). The blue boxes are the preferred grades.

Fat Class Increasing fatness →

	1	2	3L	3H	4L	4H	5
E							
U							
R							
O							
P							

Conformation Class Improving conformation ↑

Fat class is the amount of visible external fat which is scored 1-5 with 1 being the leanest and 5 the fattest. Conformation class is based on the visual shape of the carcass and leg profile (EUROP). Supermarkets and export require 18 to 21 kg lambs of E, U, or R conformation and fat class 2 to 3L. If you have presented over-weight lambs you will have been penalised on your overall p/kg and it will have cost you to put that weight on. Currently about 40% of the lamb crop falls outside EUR at fat class 2 and 3L.

The only way to monitor lamb selection is to check kill sheets against target and if too many lambs are outside spec then ask abattoir/market field staff to assist in lamb selection. Assessing how fat your lambs are can be done by feeling the dock, loin, rib and/or breast of the lamb.

Alternatively consider selecting improved breeding stock by looking at Estimated Breeding Values (EBVs) for terminal sires that can deliver

improved carcass characteristics such as lower fat and higher lean at heavier weights.

Dirty lambs cannot be slaughtered under the Meat Hygiene Service clean livestock policy due to possible faecal contamination of the meat. So every effort should be made to keep lambs clean:

- have a planned approach to worming (discuss parasite control with your vet and adhere to SCOPS principles by doing faecal egg counts, using an effective wormer and only worming when necessary),
- provide some long dry forage on lush pasture
- dag or belly shear when needed
- on winter forage crops keep lambs inside for a week or more to clean up and dry out before being sent to slaughter

A proportion of carcasses are down graded every year due to bruising or injection site abscesses. Careful handling at selection and hygienic veterinary treatments can help to avoid unnecessary trimming of the carcass.

The key is to match lambs to the desired specification and present them in the best condition possible to maximise value per lamb.

Options to fill the forage gap

As a result of the unusually dry spring and empty barns after last winter's harsh weather, there is considerable concern that winter forage will be limited. Grass supplies are under pressure now in some areas and there may well be a need to fill the forage gap in mid to late summer.

Brassica crops such as kale, forage rape, stubble turnips, kale/rape hybrids, and swedes can provide cost-effective feeds for cattle and sheep through troughs in grass supply. Grazing in-situ saves the fixed costs of machinery to harvest the crop and helps to limit winter housing costs. Forage crops also help to remove weeds and build soil fertility.

When selecting a site for grazing root crops or forage brassicas in situ it is always important to:

- Choose a suitable site in terms of soil type and drainage to reduce the risk of poaching and run-off
- Check the nutrient status of the soil and apply fertiliser and lime according to soil results (see Defra Fertiliser Manual RB209)
- Control weeds before sowing
- Provide a run back and dry lying area – essential in poor weather and for helping to keep stock clean

The table below indicates suitable sowing and cropping dates for various options.

Crop	Sowing date	Feed during
Forage rape	June-July	October to January
Stubble turnips after winter barley	July-August	November to February
Stubble turnips after grass	May-June	August/September
Kale	May-June	November to March
Kale/rape hybrids	March- August	May to December

The most suitable brassicas for grazing in the winter are kale, swedes and some of the rape/kale hybrids. Stubble turnips and forage rape are less frost hardy and are best for extending the grazing season to the end of the year.

Brassicas should always be fed with ad-lib dry, long forage to improve crop utilisation and strip grazing is the best way of managing the crop to minimise wastage. Animals should be introduced to the crop gradually to avoid digestive problems, building up to full access over a week or more. Animals should always be provided with minerals and trace elements when grazing brassicas, since they can be deficient in copper, iodine and selenium.

Most forage crops provide a very cost effective alternative to conserved forage and concentrates and are of high energy and protein content. The nutritional value and growing costs of each crop are shown below:

	Dry matter %	ME (MJ/kgDM)	Crude protein %	Average DM yield t/ha	Estimated Growing cost £/ha
Swedes	17-10	12-13	10-11	8	237
Kale	15-17	10-11	14-17	9	245
Stubble turnips	12-15	10-11	17-18	6	175
Rape/kale hybrids	12-15	10-11	18-19	3 + 2(regrowth)	175
Forage rape	10-12	10-11	19-20	4	175

To estimate crop yield and plan grazing days take several 1 metre square areas of the crop (cut to about 10cm high for rape and kale), weigh the plants, take the average weight of the metre squares and then multiply by 10,000 to get yield in tonnes per hectare. To arrive at a dry matter yield simply multiply by the dry matter % in the table above. Yields will vary according to germination, rainfall and soil fertility, but calculating crop yield will help you to work out feed availability and plan winter rations.

For further information on growing and feeding brassicas see Eblex Beef and Sheep BRP Manual 6 Using Brassicas for Better Returns.