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Getting Down and Dirty

Liz Wright finds out that where there's muck, there's grass!

The muckheap is always with us. It crouches, menacingly, in the yard, a suitable distance from the animals, the house and our neighbours. Sometimes it is tamed by the arrival of Mick and a tractor and trailer, but in a depressingly short time, it returns. So when I was walking around the Royal Show at Stoneleigh this year, my eye was taken by the Millcreek range of compact muck spreaders which could be towed by a car (in our case, a Land Rover) or an ATV. Something I could use myself without recourse to a tractor- in fact something I could do in my 'spare time'. Surely it could not be that easy? Luckily Kevin Melling of Quad Connection, was on hand to help. He quickly reassured me that I would easily be able to operate the muck spreader and then we turned to a discussion of the benefits of spreading muck back on the soil.



Loading the Millcreek spreader

The Giant Grow Bag

I live in Fenland and our soil type is peat. This is a very organic soil, in that it grows anything and everything very quickly, but it is very light. Therefore it cannot sustain grass through a dry period and struggles to keep the growth throughout the season. In fact the phrase is 'once it's gone, it's gone!' So light is our soil that if it is not actually pinned to the ground by a crop, then a wind will helpfully blow it. into the next field, which, in Fenland, is known as a 'Fen Blow'. If you happen to have just sown the field then bad luck, your wheat will be on someone else's land. We have used both organic and artificial fertilisers at the start of the growing season but I was keen to actually put some 'body' back into the land and the muck heap seemed to be the ideal choice. Kevin agreed to let me have a model to try (we selected the middle of the range 'Model 6700') and we agreed mid August as I would have time to use the spreader. Normally our summer is very dry but of course, this weather it was extremely wet. The field we chose for muck spreading is about an acre and a half and was very badly 'battled' in the winter. Due to the lateness of the hay season in our area, the ponies had only just been removed from it and in places it was rather bare. If ever there was a piece of land in need of some care, this was it! On a slightly less damp than usual day, the land rover was hitched to the Millcreek Spreader and loaded ready for use. We did this, by hand, and our muckheap was partially rotted.

Easy to Operate

The wheels moving over the ground actually drives the mechanisms, which enables the machine to spread. One wheel drives the rear 'beater' that flings the muck out, while the other wheel drives the 'apron' that feeds the muck rearwards towards the beater. This technology is not new, in fact this is how almost all muck spreaders used to operate back in the fifties, until PTO's and large-scale modern farming techniques pushed the design into the history books. In the eighties however Millcreek developed this design into the compact model range they have today, and sell many thousands every year to horse owners and smallholders around the globe. It is a very, very easy machine to operate. In order to obtain proper, aggressive spreading action, the spreader ground speed must reach approximately 3miles an hour, the equivalent of a comfortable walking pace. However, spreading at speeds over 6miles per hour (similar to brisk walking pace) offers no advantage, and usually results in the muck being flung more on the operators tow vehicle. What you do is this. Upon arriving at the point in the field you wish to start spreading, ensuring that the vehicle and spreader are stationery you first lift the optional endgate (if fitted). Then you engage the mechanisms for spreading by pushing down on the operating lever. Gently pull away, check your speed which should be at a comfortable walking pace, and the muck will simply discharge from the rear of the machine. When the spreader is emptied, come to a halt, and disengage the mechanisms by pulling up the operating lever. The muckheap was very satisfactorily spewing from the spreader and covering what was left of the green of the grass with brown. You could certainly see where you had been. I didn't panic too much as when my friend had her muck heap spread by a local farmer on her paddocks, the sward disappeared under a very unattractive covering of gloopy brown and we both thought that that was it for her summer grazing. A month or so later she was despairing, wondering what she was going to do with all the grass! We managed to shift a sizeable part of the muckheap and there seemed to be a lot of humus type matter on the field. So far so good... A few days later, and just before the rains came, we also



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ON MY SMALLHOLDING



Spreading behind a Landrover





The empty Millcreek spreader

harrowed the field, as we had not been able to keep on top of dropping collection.

Green grows the grass ho!

Then it rained. And rained. And guess what? Well you have, haven't you? It rained. The grass grew, you could see it poking its little green shoots through the muck within a matter of days. Within a matter of weeks there was very little muck to be seen. Two months on there is no muck but a vast amount of grass and it is still going. We have not put the ponies in as this is our winter paddock but there is a definitive improvement on this time last year. I am sure that the field has more 'bottom' in it and therefore more ability to sustain the grass, such a problem with our type of soil. I will be interested to see how the grass reacts next spring. My guess is that it will be far less exhausted than it was this year.

Maintenance

Of course you can't just forget the spreader when it has done its job. You need to clean it out, at least once a week if it is in constant use and before storage. You must never leave manure in it when the load could freeze as it could damage the apron chain and similarly storing wet manure will accelerate the rusting of the steel, although Millcreek thoughtfully fit a 'non-rotting' recycled high density plastic flooring to most models as standard. It should be an absolute rule to everyone on your smallholding that no string, metal, wood, nails and in fact, nothing but muck, should go on your muckheap. They will not rot down, damage shredders and if they get on to the land, damage stock. You should also apply chain lube once a month to the drive chains such as vegetable oil or a commons spray lube. So nothing there that common sense wouldn't help you with.

Well Worthwhile

I was very pleased with the result of muck spreading and will certainly look to do this again on a regular basis. I prefer to keep livestock off the fields for a while after spreading muck and of course, we operate a sensible worming programme. It does seem ridiculous that many people have to pay someone to take away a muckheap and then buy in fertiliser for your grass. This is a much more sustainable and workable solution. Kevin says that as well as spreading on an occasional basis as we did, many Millcreek owners use their spreaders as a direct replacement for the wheelbarrow, and spread directly onto a resting paddock immediately after mucking into it, eliminating the muck pile completely in the process. I feel satisfied that we have put something back on to the land and that it was straightforward to do so. A very useful machine that if carefully used, could pay for itself in terms of grassland management and fertiliser costs.

Millcreek 'ground drive' compact spreaders start from £1,295 (including VAT), with a range of slightly larger 'PTO drive' versions also available (for those with a compact tractor) priced from £2,395 (including VAT). For further details contact Kevin Melling of Quad Connection on (01652) 679000 or (07850) 343249, or visit their website at www.quadconnection.co.uk