For Edward Collins a compact lambing period and careful ewe management after weaning are key elements of successful flock management.

Ewe management optimises lamb crop

Making efficient use of grass, labour and genetics is key to a successful lambing for one Herefordshire-based producer

Edward Collins keeps a 320-ewe pedigree Lleyn flock, which runs alongside 30 pedigree Blue Texels solely on permanent pasture.

"With a flock of this size optimising lambing percentage is paramount, but while the Lleyn breed is naturally prolific this can be troublesome, with a high number of triplets often common.

"As a result I've worked hard over time to breed a flock which produces a high number of twins without high numbers of triplets or quads. Indeed I've not seen a set of quads for four years now, which is a great relief when it comes to lambing."

Mr Collins says optimising lamb numbers has been a long-term breeding project, but also comes back to careful ewe management after weaning and pre-tupping.

"Using performance recording has allowed me to identify female lines performing at their optimum level and reduce the numbers having large litters to more manageable levels."

Crucially too he says ewes are not flushed ahead of tupping in order to keep litter sizes at optimum manageable levels.

"All the grassland is permanent pasture, but it is still high quality grass and flushing could easily result in large litter sizes despite breeding for lower lamb numbers."

Additionally, targeting a compact lambing period helps keep lambing percentages at sensible levels, he explains.

"I use teaser rams along with a mineral and vitamin drench to promote a compact lambing, dosing the ewes 14 days or so before the rams go in. And while many may think that would promote more lambs, in my experience it doesn't, but it does result in a better hold to first service, which is critical in making best use of the feed and labour resources both at lambing and throughout the rest of the year.

"Combining the use of teasers with the mineral drench results in about 95% of ewes holding in the first cycle, dramatically reducing the number being served in the second cycle. Having ewes cycling well before the tups go in is the simplest way of improving the hold rate and it results in a much more compact and manageable lambing."

"It may seem an unnecessary expense to

be drenching a prolific breed such as the Lleyn, but having optimised lamb numbers through breeding it is a great tool to help boost the hold to first service, which is essential in making best use of the grass and labour resources."

In fact using a mineral drench is cutting costs compared to his previous system of using mineral buckets and it also ensures every ewe is receiving a dose of minerals, rather than just one or two ewes gorging on the buckets.

Mr Collins says keeping a compact lambing helps with flock management as it allows a group of ewe lambs to lamb relatively soon after the ewes have lambed and means lambs are of an even size and growth stage throughout the year. "I only give the ewes two cycles with the rams and anything not in lamb after that is culled, while the ewe lambs also only have one cycle with the rams."

Ewe management after weaning is also a central part of the policy of attaining a manageable lambing percentage, with ewes stocked tightly immediately after weaning to ensure they dry up. They are then grazed according to body condition. "Fitter ewes are grazed more tightly, while leaner ewes are grazed on better grass, while the lambs go on to silage aftermaths to promote growth through the summer."

All in all these measures have been highly successful in helping reduce lamb numbers to a good level, he explains. "When I started with the Lleyns in 1998 the scanning percentage would have been close to 230%, much too high to be managed on a largely forage-based system. However, through the use of recording and careful flock management – combined with use of appropriate mineral supplementation – it is now about 200% which is ideal for the system I run."

Alongside a move to promote a compact lambing period Mr Collins has also worked hard to improve the conformation of his lamb crop through the use of rams carrying the Myomax muscling gene.

"Over the last five years 90% of the lambs sold on a deadweight basis have been R3L or better, matching the buyers requirements well, with a 19.8kg average carcass weight."

The aim for the flock is to sell all lambs from grass if possible, with about 90% of lambs sold from grass at the current time. "Keeping lamb growth rates up throughout the season is crucial to this, with lambs wormed at four weeks of age to counteract any nematodirus threat and also given a mineral drench at the same time. This backs up the drench given to their mothers in the run up to lambing and gives them a boost as they start to graze more and become less reliant on their mother's milk.

"Lambs are then wormed according to faecal egg count and receive another mineral drench ahead of weaning, with this drench helping avoid any growth check at that time," he explains.

This ensures lambs keep growing and laying down flesh through the summer, ensuring they finish well and taking the pressure off grassland ready for ewes to graze through the autumn and winter, says Mr Collins.

"Ewe lambs retained for breeding are then tupped to homebred Blue Texel rams in early November, and grazed over winter before being housed for lambing and fed on haylage and feed blocks. This works well and avoids having to disturb ewe lambs in the run up to lambing.

"Ewe lambs not being retained are sold as lambs for breeding rather than rearing them through to shearlings, with this also helping ease the pressure on grassland over winter."