

## 2011 WINNER: MATTHEW SHARP



### Farmers crippled by rising straw prices

**High straw prices, the result of a straw shortage this year, have left livestock producers looking to alternative sources of bedding this coming winter.**

"A dry spring left crops thin, and with very little to carry over from last year, straw is in great demand," said Robert Sullivan, Farm Consultant at Strutt and Parker. "There has been some exceptions but straw yield, on average, has been down".

With straw prices reported to be up to nearly £90 a ton in some regions, livestock farmers and specifically dairy farmers, are looking to ways in which they can reduce cost.

#### Sawdust

Sawdust is one material producers are using to avoid costly straw especially when mattresses are installed in cubicles. With only a light covering needed on mats, sawdust can prove cost effective and efficient in the dairy herd. "A fifty per cent sawdust and fifty percent lime ash works well for us," said Northumbrian dairy farmer Dennis Gibb. "Providing its kiln dried, the sawdust works well as bedding and complemented with lime ash, the PH means bacteria cannot grow therefore reducing cell counts and mastitis problems". Sawdust does have to be stored in a dry, clean space which could prove problematic for some farmers requiring vast quantities.

#### Sand

Sand is also another popular option despite some concerns about the effect it has on slurry systems; especially wear on the pump. But with new technology on show at last weeks Dairy Event and Livestock Show, removing sand from slurry is proving much easier.

"It needs to be deep and wouldn't work on the mattresses we currently use but if we were to consider building new cubicles, I would definitely consider sand," Mr Gibb said. "Not only is it good for bedding but it often prevents cows slipping when it is pushed back."

#### Gypsum

Reducing the need for lime and enhancing slurry nutrients is a major attraction to Gypsum for some dairy producers. "Gypsum is a highly absorbent material but is not suited to deep bedding," said Peter Shipton of Kingshay. Anna Mcpherson, who milks 150 Holsteins, added; "We've used gypsum before but have encountered problems with it solidifying getting stuck in slats". "Despite this, some farmers choose to mix it with chopped straw or sawdust which could help reduced the problems of it solidifying," she continued. Despite this, Gypsum does have a place on many dairy farms, especially when used as a blend alongside sawdust. Reducing the need for lime on beds as well as reducing the need to buy in lime to spread on land, gypsum can prove a cost effective alternative for many farmers.

Using straw can still be an option for farmers but poor quality straw can leave significant health problems within a herd. More pressures on straw for organic matter in the soil as a way of reducing fertiliser costs mean alternatives may become something which more farmers should consider when looking at dairy profitability and management.

*(Published in Farmers Weekly's Livestock section, 23 September 2011)*



## 2011 RUNNER-UP: **BARBARA TREMAIN**



### **Spices turn up the heat at Chelsea Physic Garden**

**Gardeners can tantalise their tastebuds at the Chelsea Physic Garden's Summer Spice exhibition – which runs until mid-October.**

Visitors can see 50 spice plants at the London garden – and learn how to grow them in their own back yards.

Displays include South Indian culinary plants such as chilli 'Sweet Wrinkled Old Man'.

The spice exhibit has taken root in the garden's micro-climate, a sheltered location close to the river Thames.

The project was inspired by a trip to Kerala, and will improve into the autumn, said head gardener Nick Bailey.

Brightly-coloured displays accompany each plant. Leaflets and signs guide visitors, explaining plants' medicinal uses and historical purposes.

Created on a budget of £2,500, the Summer Spice showcase features specimen plants that cost £200, as many were propagated from seed and cuttings.

Ginger rhizomes were bought by Nick from Brixton market for £3 each, and cultivated in a tropical glasshouse.

BBC2's Grow Your Own Drugs presenter James Wong hosted a tour on August Bank Holiday Monday.

Call (020) 7352 5646 or go to [www.chelseaphysicgardensguide.co.uk](http://www.chelseaphysicgardensguide.co.uk) for details.

**5 spices to grow at home  
Grow in your summer garden or  
on a winter windowsill**

#### **Caraway -**

Sow early autumn or spring in modules, pots or into the soil. This biennial self seeds.

#### **Celery -**

Sow outdoors early spring, or in deep pots.

#### **Coriander -**

Soak for 3-5 days, then dry. Plant in a warm spot. Take root cuttings in late winter.

#### **Dill -**

Sow outdoors in spring. Keep well watered. Likes pots on a sunny windowsill.

#### **Fennel -**

Sow in spring, or divide root and crowns in autumn.

#### **Mustard -**

Summer and autumn crops from outdoor sowings, on well fertilised sunny soil. Keep watered.

*(Written for Amateur Gardening magazine)*

