

Graze Standing Corn for Forage Flexibility

by Troy Smith

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Gleaning crop residues after grain harvest is nothing new, but purposely grazing standing corn is not a common practice among U.S. cattlemen. Some producers have utilized green, growing corn as a grazing resource for stockers or cattle being grass-finished, and more rarely with cows. But Grazing Consultant Bob Scriven, of Kearney, Neb., thinks more cattle producers might want to consider corn's potential as a grazed forage crop. It is a summer annual grass, after all, and corn can provide serious graziers with more forage flexibility.

"Grazing standing corn is simple, low-cost and efficient," Scriven says. "As forage, corn is high-yielding and easy to manage. It's flexible. Corn offers a relatively long grazing season and you can harvest the crop if it's not grazed."



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► "I really think corn for grazing is one of the easiest forage crops to manage, and it offers a lot of flexibility," says Grazing Consultant Bob Scriven.

According to Scriven, the best time to graze standing corn is spring, summer, fall or winter. It can be grazed while green or after dry-down. It just depends on when you need the forage. Corn should be allowed to reach the 8- to 10-leaf stage before grazing it, however, or it really won't produce much forage. It's best if it has reached the tassel stage.

Getting started isn't hard. Scriven advises producers to estimate the amount of area or number of rows in the field that will be needed for a given number of cattle for a given period of time. Calculations can be based on animals consuming 3% to 4% of their body weight per day in dry matter. He recommends moving stockers to fresh forage daily, while cows could be moved every two days. The cattle should be accustomed to an electric fence.

"You should know that your estimate of area needed might not be quite right at first. You'll have to adjust. It's like reading bunks in a feedlot," Scriven says.

The field is strip-grazed by restricting cattle access to areas allocated by portable electric fence. Cattle are allowed to graze across the field, advancing one allocated strip at a time. Scriven advises producers to always keep the "next" strip fenced and ready. That way, if cattle happen to go through one hot wire, escaping today's allocated area, there is another wire confining them to tomorrow's area. At least they won't have access to all of the remaining ungrazed portion of the field.

Scriven says the energy value of corn doesn't change much. It provides about 72% total digestible nutrients (TDN) whether it's grazed while green and growing or at maturity. Average daily gains of 2 pounds (lb.) to 2½ lb. are attainable when grazing corn, making the practice worthy of consideration by producers involved in production of grass-finished beef. However, since their objective is to avoid feeding cattle starch from grain, grass-finishers would want

to graze standing corn prior to ear development. Other tips for finishing cattle on standing corn would include selection of suitable varieties — those that will yield tonnage in terms of forage with high sugar content and low lignin.

"It's just the opposite of what you want for grain production," Scriven adds. "Tropical varieties grow tall, produce a volume of forage and probably won't make ears in the North. Detasselling is another way to keep corn from making grain. And planting for high populations also maximizes forage production."

Scriven says corn for grazing can be planted in narrow rows or with a drill. Staggering planting of fields to be grazed can help extend the period over which green forage would be available. In the Midwest, for example, this might be accomplished by starting in May and planting more corn every two weeks until about July 15. Planting after then might not afford enough time for corn to achieve much growth and yield a suitable amount of forage before frost.

Nitrate poisoning can be a concern when grazing corn residues, and Scriven says it can be an issue when grazing standing corn. Nitrates tend to accumulate in the lower stalk, so producers should not allow cattle to graze plants down to the ground. However, Scriven says the potential for nitrate poisoning typically is worse when corn receives heavy applications of nitrogen fertilizer. Corn grown for grazing really doesn't need much added nitrogen and may not need much added fertilizer of any kind.

"When cattle graze the fields, 85% of the nutrients in the grazed forage goes right back on the ground through their manure," Scriven explains. "I really think corn for grazing is one of the easiest forage crops to manage, and it offers a lot of flexibility. You can start almost anytime and finish in time to plant again."

