THE GRAZIER

Adopt Pasture Husbandry Skills

The current term for someone who grows grasses and legumes, then markets this forage as pasture via livestock products is grass farmer. The title grass farmer is used because it puts the emphasis on forage production as the primary generator of income on a livestock farm.

Grasses and legumes turn solar energy into a useable product with minimum input. As the old adage, "It's hard to go broke farming with a barn full of hay" emphasizes — forage production is a key ingredient to a successful livestock enterprise. But saying grass farmer allows us to pull out our deeply ingrained image of a farmer. We all know a farmer is someone on a tractor, plowing the soil so they can plant a crop. Unfortunately, this year-to-year farming mentality gets carried over to pasture management. We need to change grass FARMER to GRASS farmer — even better would be pasture husbandry.

Pasture husbandry is treating pasture with the same skills and talents we apply to livestock production. Let me give you some examples so you can judge your pasture husbandry ability.

Breed identification — Every beef producer I've ever met prides themself on knowing the various breeds of beef cattle. Your respect as a cattleman or cattlewoman would be in jeopardy if you couldn't tell an Angus from a Hereford, or a Simmental from a Shorthorn. But how many grass farmers can walk out in their pasture and identify the plants that fuel their livestock enterprise?

At a recent grazing workshop the average grass and legume identification quiz score was 35 percent. This was not a tough quiz, we used plants like timothy, bluegrass, brome, red clover, alfalfa and birdsfoot trefoil with their seed heads or flowers.

It's ironic that so many producers ask what species to plant and then probably can't identify it when it does grow. Do you know what's growing in your pastures?

Growth and Performance — Dairymen know that Holsteins on the average give the most pounds of milk whereas Jerseys will produce milk with the highest percentage butterfat. It's accepted by both beef and dairy producers that females should deliver their first calf at about two years of age.

Here's a sample of what you should know about pasture plants:

Orchardgrass grows a seed head after exposure to near freezing temperatures. That means after you remove the spring seed head and the weather warms, orchardgrass will be vegetative (leaves only) all summer until cool fall nights return. The growing point of brome and timothy grass moves up the stem as head emerges occur. When close grazing or cutting remove this growing point, a recovery period is needed to get regrowth started from the base of the stem. This characteristic is often called a summer slump, when it's just the way timothy and brome grow, or don't grow.

Bluegrass has both a low growing point and rhizomes, and will tolerate lax grazing management. Overgrazing or close mowing allows daylight to stimulate white clover growth so most lawns have clover. These are just samples of pasture growth knowledge. We need to observe and study pasture, just like we have livestock, to better manage it for our benefit.

Livestock nutrition — Given that more livestock eat a balanced ration than people do, it's obvious we have raised livestock nutrition to a fine science. In addition to a balanced ration, we condition score cows for different stages of production.

Pasture production is like a cow's production in that this year's nutrition and condition can impact next year's productivity. Just like a cow needs to gain condition in late lactation for the next lactation, a plant/pasture needs to build root reserves in late summer/early fall for next year's spring growth. Grazing livestock recycles 70 to 80 percent of the phosphorus and potassium as dung and urine.

I have tremendous respect for farmers and the concept of grass farming. However, you can't put together an exceptional herd of cows in one year and you can't grow a dense healthy multi-species pasture in one year. Growing and managing pasture takes time and knowledge. Start today to brush up on your pasture husbandry knowledge.

— Ben Bartlett, Michigan State University Extension

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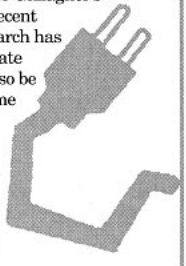
Proper Grounding Eliminates Problems

Gallagher Power Fence Inc. has found that 85 percent of all damaged electric fence energizers have been damaged by electrical surges or lighting coming from the utility side, not the fence side.

The problem is caused, in almost all cases, by inadequate grounding of either primary or secondary sources, resulting in surges seeking out the power fence grounding system and damaging the energizer along the way.

In addition to Gallagher's studies, some recent university research has shown inadequate grounding to also be the cause of some stray voltage problems.



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