



Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

An organization of farmers, gardeners, and consumers working to promote an economically viable and ecologically sound Vermont food system

PASTURE MANAGEMENT

Spring grazing and planning ahead for summer grazing Sarah Flack

Spring is almost here and its time to think about adjusting your spring feeding ration and begin planning ahead to when pasture growth slows. Because pasture is a high protein feed, cows will do best if they are fed a high energy feed in the barn. **A common mistake for dairy farmers converting to grazing is to continue to feed a high protein grain once the cows have started grazing in the spring.** This not only costs money in grain, but is hard on the cow's health and productivity. Corn meal, barley, molasses, or corn silage are some of the high energy feeds which work well for cows on pasture. Start talking with your nutritionist now to change grains before grazing starts.

Pasture plants need time to rest after each grazing, giving them time to replenish energy stored in roots (by photosynthesizing). Plants are ready to be grazed again when they have regained their healthy green color and regrown to an ideal height of 6-8 inches. The feed quality of pastures managed in a rotational system tends to be very high and the density or volume of feed is greater compared to continuously grazed pastures.

Continuously grazing animals in the same pasture or returning them to a pasture before it is fully re-grown does not give the plants time to recover. Repeated grazing, without adequate time for plants to re-grow results in weakened plants that may stop growing and die. These weakened plants will not be able to compete with weed species, and won't be able to hold the soil as well, resulting in bare soil and erosion. Some grasses and clovers will survive by staying very short, never growing tall enough for livestock to easily graze. Other areas in the pasture will be rejected by livestock, soon growing up into weeds, brush or small trees.

Plants grow about twice as fast in spring compared to later summer. When planning the order in which you graze your spring pastures and what areas to hay first, make sure to add more land into the grazing rotation in late spring or early summer when pasture growth slows. If the number of grazing acres is not increased, the plants will not be getting enough rest, and dry matter intake by the animals will drop, resulting in both poor animal and pasture performance.

One of the most common mistakes in grazing is not adding additional acres as plant growth rates slow. This is not good for the plants, and is also hard on the cows, as they need enough height and density of plants in the pasture in order to get enough dry matter.

Cows can only take a certain number of bites each day, then they need to rest and chew their cuds. This is why many dairy farms provide their cows with a fresh pasture after each milking, making sure the pasture is fully re-grown before the cows go into it. When cows are turned into a pasture that is 6 to 10 inches tall, the cows are able to rapidly fill their rumens.



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Grazing tips:

- Don't follow a set rotation; graze according to plant growth rates. If one pasture grows faster than the others, graze it more often. If you have a pasture which grows very slowly, graze some other areas and let the plants grow back.
 - Set up small paddocks so that cows don't stay in one area for more than 3 days; 12 to 24 hours per pasture is far better.
 - Move animals frequently - moving animals more frequently can increase dry matter intake (DMI) and improve pasture quality.
 - Use a back fence to prevent "back grazing", so that animals don't overgraze favorite plants. Don't let animals back into an area until it has grown tall enough.
 - **Switch to a low protein high energy grain in the barn as soon as the cows go out to pasture in the spring.**
 - Make sure pastures are tall enough so cows are getting enough daily DMI.
- Plan ahead now for the additional land you will need later in the grazing season.