

Grazing Bites

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My wife calls me a procrastinator sometimes, but I'd rather think of it as "waiting for the right moment" to start something. The weather threw a few monkey wrenches into my plans this year and I've tried to not feel overwhelmed as things that I needed to do began to pile up a bit. Part of my problem is I say yes to too many things and then the cobbler's kids go barefoot – or rather I do. Life has a lot to do with choices and that is true with pasture management too.



Sheep grazing/browsing their desirables which can be very nutritious.

I'm asked every year about mowing or clipping pastures. For most, that is an annual ritual and quite often a very justifiable management decision. The most asked question is always, "When should I clip?" My most common question in reply is, "What are you trying to accomplish?" For most, the reason is to remove seed heads and or reduce weeds, and for a certain percentage it's purely aesthetics.

You normally would hear me preach about making sure to keep everything as vegetative as possible by ideally grazing it. That can sometimes be easier said than done. Generally, a high stocking density for a short period of time – ideally less than two days – creates enough competition between animals that most forage and a surprisingly high amount of weeds are grazed off pretty quickly and evenly. This keeps weeds from creating too much competition for desirable forage species.

The lower the stock density and longer the grazing period on a larger allotment, the less competition there is between animals and the more selective they are of what to graze. When this happens, desirable species are eaten first, and intermediate and undesirable species are grazed around. If this happens very much, the pasture composition can shift from desirable species to increased amounts of undesirables as they slowly get stronger foot holds.

That said, the type of livestock present makes a difference in forage preferences. Cattle certainly prefer grasses and legumes and a small amount of browse. Browse in this case is usually some tree leaves. Small ruminants such as sheep or goats eat a wider variety of species. Goats tend to be more of a browser than a grazer. Pastures that are grazed early in the season by sheep or goats tend to have fewer weeds than cattle pasture. If you raise both, it might be smart to either switch them around occasionally as to where they start the season grazing or perhaps graze them together as a flerd.

For some weeds, some livestock will mimic the kid at the dinner table being told to eat their broccoli – they just will not eat it no matter what. I can understand that – especially when it comes to blackberries and multi-flora rose. Both can be a thorn in my side, and I don't blame any cow for not wanting to try and graze among them.

Back to the question of "When should I clip?" If it is purely to slow seed head production, then mowing earlier is generally better than later if you want to maintain quality. I say that somewhat tongue in cheek because I absolutely hate to remove any quality grazable forage. If you are using a typical bushhog, then even if you have it as high as it can be raised, you usually are removing grazable forage. If it turns dry, then you just reduced the amount of potential forage available.

If you are bound and determined to clip, at least wait until right after grazing it. Once it has been grazed, reassess it and determine if clipping is still feasible. If the cows were allowed to pick and choose and only ate ice cream and no broccoli, then yes, to prevent the “broccoli” from increasing or going to seed, clipping would be beneficial. If animals had more competition per allocation, then it might be harder to justify.

I’ve fought more briars and ironweed this season than normal. Early season grazing under wet conditions can create opportunities for some pests to try and get a foothold in small, slightly more disturbed areas. If you were able to graze this spring under wet conditions and not pug, plug, or almost plow up areas trying to graze quickly across it, then my hat is off to you. It was challenging. Only areas that had heavy cover were left somewhat unscathed.

Mowing or clipping it is a common management tool that can certainly be very beneficial, but it also can sometimes do more harm than good. Besides the potential removal of grazable forage, clipping short after prolonged close grazing reduces root mass and greatly slows regrowth. Evaporation is generally also increased under this circumstance leading to higher soil temperatures and, most likely, increased oxidation of carbon through the reduction of soil organic matter.

In late July as I’m writing this, I have not clipped any pastures yet and honestly, from the way a couple of them look, especially from a distance, they are about to reach my personal threshold aesthetically. Except for a few weeks in June, the understory has continued to grow faster than I have time or decent weather conditions to manage. The windshield view is worse than the walking view in most cases. In other words, from a distance it looks a lot worse than it is up close.

If the canopy of less desirables starts to get even close to thirty percent – it will get clipped. That is my threshold. If an undesirable starts to go to seed – it will get clipped. If I can’t clip higher than any grazable desirable forage, then it will get grazed again prior to being clipped, especially if something will eat the target species.

Is just removing seed heads a justifiable reason for clipping? Some people would quickly say yes and state the reason was to reduce cases of pinkeye. The seed heads do not cause pink eye, or at least not independently. The seed heads along with other things present irritate the eyes. Watery eyes draw flies. The flies then move the bacteria from the infected animal to other animals.

Dr. Bill Shulaw, OSU extension veterinarian, once wrote, “*Pinkeye demonstrates a well-known principle in infectious diseases. Disease usually occurs only when there is a susceptible host (in this case a non-immune cow), an infectious agent (Moraxella bovis for pinkeye), and environmental conditions that favor infection of the host (irritation of the eye to create tears that attract the flies and that favor the attachment of the bacteria to eye tissues).*”

Remember, it’s not about maximizing a grazing event, but maximizing a grazing season! Keep on grazing!

Reminders & Opportunities

More pasture information and past issues of Grazing Bites are available at

<https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/in/technical/landuse/pasture/>

Purdue Forage Management Day will be September 1 at the Feldun-Purdue Agricultural Center, Bedford.

<https://ag.purdue.edu/agry/dtc/Pages/Calendar.aspx>

Grazing Bites has changed. Please send comments or questions to grazingbites@gmail.com.