

GRAZING BITES

February 2023

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The best thing about winter is it, eventually, passes and gives way to spring. I think I'm already ready for it. Each day is a bit longer than the previous and the light at the end of the tunnel is green! I walked over some pastures earlier this week and there certainly was now more brown than green. Snow, ice and some bitter cold spells have taken most of the color from forage unless you carefully peel back the cover and look closer. There it is, bits of green, waiting for a warmer day.



Clover seedlings hopefully appearing later this spring – like some cover, but not too much competition.

Most years I really like the month of February. The sod is usually firm enough to get around on and do some needed maintenance. The weather doesn't always cooperate, but quite often yields several nice sunny days that are perfect for cleaning fence rows, trimming back limbs over fences and repairing or building fences. It is quiet and peaceful with the only noise being whatever tool I'm using and the dog rooting and digging after a mole or mouse. After the forage starts to grow, everything speeds up and it's harder to find the time to do maintenance tasks.

I find this type of work relaxing and just a good time to think. It is always a good idea to be thinking about where you will start your grazing system come spring. It is usually a good thing to not start in the same field each year. If the pasture was grazed fairly close or hard the previous fall it could ideally use more rest to build up reserves. Using the same field year after year will sometimes really thin down those early pastures. I like to rotate which field is used first and, if at all possible, leave some stockpiled forage on it.

There are multiple items to consider when choosing the field to start in. How much forage is left? How dense is the sod? If you can see much bare soil or little residual forage, then grazing should be delayed in the spring until the stand has bounced back and thickened up.

If you run any sheep, you will notice that fields that are utilized earlier in the year by the sheep will usually tend to have less weeds in them later in the growing season. It is certainly easier to keep lambing ewes closer to home and utilize the same fields every year, but if you have weed issues, you might want to consider trying to do early grazing of sheep in those areas instead.

Goats can also do a good job of weed control but tend to eat from the top down and don't take out the weeds quite as early as sheep do. Grazing a small ruminant with cattle can also work quite well as long as you don't crowd them up too much. I occasionally run them together as a flerd.

How much you used your stockpiled forage in the winter can also impact where you start in the spring. The bitter cold period we had a few weeks back changed my plans due to lack of a sufficient windbreak and later wet soil conditions. Because of that, I still have a little stockpiled forage left that could be utilized. If we don't get back there, we'll just hit that area first in the spring.

It is also the time frame for frost-seeding clover onto fields that need it. If you paid attention during the last season, you should know what fields are lacking sufficient legume. I like to see at least 30% of the stand being legumes. Legumes, such as clover, increase the quality of a pasture and can also fix nitrogen to help the grass component of the pasture. When fertilizer is expensive, you want as much natural nitrogen produced as possible.

Red and white clover both are fairly easy to frost-seed this time of year and generally that is the least expensive way to enhance legumes in the pasture. It is basically the process of broadcasting the legume seed onto the soil's surface during the winter dormant months and allowing the freezing and thawing of the soil to help move the seed into the soil.

It is best to plan if you decide to frost-seed. You may have wanted to graze the pasture down a little shorter than normal to reduce competition and help that seed find its way to the soil easier. If the field is being stockpiled, you can either wait until after it is grazed or broadcast it just prior to grazing and let the seed be "hoofed" in. If there is too much cover then it makes it hard for the seed to reach the soil and makes it less likely to thrive.

I usually recommend slightly higher seeding rates for frost seeding than for conventional seeding. White clovers can be seeded at 1-1.5 lbs. per acre, remembering that it is a much smaller seed than red clover and will be around longer. Red clover should be seeded at 6-8 lbs. per acre, birdsfoot trefoil at 5 lbs. per acre and common lespedeza with hulled seed at 10 lbs. per acre.

All legumes should be inoculated with the appropriate inoculants (rhizobia) for that species to make sure proper bacteria, good germination and growth. Coated seed, when available, can solve a lot of problems including seed size, the inoculants and it can even help the pH for the seedling. Coated seed should be used the same year that it is purchased, mainly due to the inoculant – it has a slightly shorter storage life.

I think the main points for a successful frost seeding of legumes are grazing the pasture down before seeding to lower the amount of litter and spring competition, seeding during freezing and thawing conditions to help move the seed down into the soil and then keeping the grass growth under control during early spring to give the seedlings plenty of sun and a fighting chance to survive.

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

Reminders & Opportunities

Northern Indiana Grazing Conference – February 3-4, 2023 - Michiana Event Center, Shipshewana, IN. For more information go to [NIGC | lagrangeswcd \(lagrange-swcd.wixsite.com\)](https://lagrangeswcd.wixsite.com)

Heart of America Grazing Conference – February 20-21, 2023 – Ferdinand, IN - www.indianaforage.org



Southern Indiana Grazing Conference – March 29, 2023 – Shiloh Community Center, Odon, IN – For more information call 812-254-4780, Ext 3 or register online at <https://sigc2023.eventbrite.com>



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