

# Grazing for Heifers, Making It Work

What does it take to make it work? What are the specific management practices necessary in order to make pasture feeding profitable for heifers?

## Growing Grasses – Species Selection

Growing grasses is the foundation on which everything else rests. And, one of the most basic decisions in grass production is the selection of species.

For the computer literate, the several websites have recommendations for species selection, grazing management and forage crops. Users will get the most accurate information if they have farm soil maps giving soil types for the fields being considered for grass production.

## Web Sites

<http://www.forages.org>

You need to know your zip code and county name to run this program. If you know the soil type the recommendations and yield projections will be more specific. I chose as an animal group “Beef cows” because heifers are not listed as a choice. Species specific projected yield data are available per acre by month during the growing season.

<http://pss.uvm.edu/vtcrops/>

Click first at the left on Pasture and Grazing. Then choose Topics and Articles for more resources. The first topic is “Species selection and establishment.” The “Links” choice has an excellent list of grazing sites for a broad variety of topics.

## Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative

Grazing resource persons from the New York State Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative (NYSGLCI) may be of assistance, also. This cooperative effort involves a wide range of individuals and organizations. The consultants are available without charge to assist with (1) species selection, (2) the planning and design of grazing systems, and (3) assistance with ration balancing with managed intensive grazing (MIG)

If you are not already acquainted with the person working in your area, the NYSGLCI may be contacted at 315-736-3316 extension 101 (dave.roberts@ny.usda.gov). Their statewide office is located at 9025 River Road, Marcy, NY 13403.

### **Establishing an Infrastructure for Grazing**

The layout of an efficient grazing system is a prerequisite to profitable heifer feeding on grass. Layout decisions include fencing, laneways, water distribution, paddock shape and size and gate location.

A publication entitled, “Prescribed Grazing and Feeding Management for Lactating Dairy Cows,” is now available online at this URL <http://grazingguide.net/2011/05/feeding-management-for-lactating-dairy-cows/> and can read online or downloaded for printing (63 pages).

This free resource contains numerous illustrations of practical paddock, laneway and waterline layouts.

### **Stocking Paddocks**

Efficient utilization of grass resources depends on matching the number of heifers to the amount of forage available for grazing. Experienced grazing managers have adopted a variety of methods to remove some of the guessing involved in estimating the amount of forage available in a paddock.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in New York State has developed a tool called the “Pasture Estimating Device.” Farmers can use this tool to evaluate the amount the forage that is available in pastures that are between six and twelve inches in height. It doesn’t measure the total standing crop or entire yield of a pasture. Information about this tool is available from NYSGLCI in Marcy without charge.

## Is Grazing a Profitable Practice?

Management is always central to profitability of any dairy farm practice. Utilizing pasture for raising heifers requires not only good animal management, however.

In addition, farmers with grazing experience point out that their first two or three years using pasture involved acquiring lots of new knowledge and learning many new skills related to growing grass.

Northeast grass pastures when properly managed and harvested can produce six or seven tons of dry matter per acre in years with average rainfall. When the pasture is harvested through managed intensive grazing heifers can consistently gain in excess of two pounds daily.

### For Your Information

A useful reference in this area is:

Graze – Published ten times yearly this newsletter may be ordered for \$30 from the Graze, P.O. Box 48, Belleville, WI 53508. Telephone is 608-455-3311 email [graze@grazeonline.com](mailto:graze@grazeonline.com) and [www.grazeonline.com](http://www.grazeonline.com) is the web site. Each issue contains articles from practicing graziers focusing on practical issues of species selection, pasture management and infrastructure issues.

Those interested in investigating the economic side of grazing may wish to look at these sites:

A look at the comparison of cost and labor of grazing vs feedlot raised dairy heifers; [http://www.extension.org/pages/Labor\\_Efficient\\_Pasture\\_Management](http://www.extension.org/pages/Labor_Efficient_Pasture_Management)

The Northeast Pasture Consortium has consolidated many pasture-related resources at their website including both research and practical extension materials; <http://grazingguide.net/>

Also, try going here, <http://onpasture.com/category/grazingmanagement/> for an on-line pasture resource with daily postings.