

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

Similar web sites exist for other geographical settings. I used www.dogpile.com and found 100 or more listings, many from universities.

Grazing Lands Coalitions

Grazing resource persons from the National Grazing Lands Coalition (NatGLC) or the New York Grazing Coalition may be of assistance, also. These cooperatives involve a wide range of individuals and organizations. The consultants are available 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 In New York State you may wish to contact Dave Roberts at 315-736-3316 Ext 101 dave.roberts@ny.usda.gov . His office is located at 9025 River Road, Marcy, NY 13403. The animal nutritionist specializing in grazing operations is Karen Hoffman, Resource Conservationist, USDA NRCS, 99 N. Broad Street, Norwich, NY 13815-1387 karen.hoffman2@ny.usda.gov 607-334-3231 Ext 116. [These contacts were verified May 17, 2019.]

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 number of publications are available [Northeast Pasture Consortium](#). Their url is <http://grazingguide.net/> .

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.

Dave Roberts has this advice:

“There are several ways to measure the amount of available forage in a pasture and it comes down to accuracy, ease of use and personal preference.

There are two general types of plate meters – raising plates and falling plates – They consist of a flat plate that is horizontal to the ground surface and is free to slide up or down a vertical shaft. It is used to measure the amount of forage that occupies the space between the plate and the ground surface. The tool basically measures the volume of forage. This volume is converted to weight and results in lbs of forage per acre. Of course there is calibration involved before the results mean anything.

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There are plenty of examples from various State extension agencies on where to purchase/ how to make them as well as calibration and use.

Pasture Grazing Sticks – is a measuring stick that measures the average height of the forage plants, many of these that a marked grid with a dot pattern on the side of the stick to measure the density of the forage. There are conversion tables usually marked on the side of the stick to estimate lbs of forage per acre. This method is less accurate than the plate meters though easier to use

Pasture squares/range hoops are either rectangle or circle made of metal with a known specific area inside. The area inside is clipped, dried and weighed. There are conversion tables to convert the weight of dried forage measured inside the hoop or square to the amount of forage per acre. This is the most accurate when done properly though very time consuming and typically done for research studies and to calibrate the other methods listed above.

There are other techniques to estimate forage by using records of feed or stocking charts and then back estimating the amount of forage consumed. All these techniques require training specifically relating to finding representative sampling locations, number of test, use of the equipment etc.

Keep in mind this equipment only measures the amount of forage at a given time, It does not estimate the amount of forage in the future since regrow is influenced by many factors; temperature, moisture, amount sunlight, plant nutrition and plant vigor. You can forecast and guess the amount of forage though this is dependent on weather forecast and other factors. Each of us has their opinion on how accurate weather forecast are. ”

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.

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For Your Information

Useful references in this area are:

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 and 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.

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

Those interested in investigating the economic side of grazing may wish to look at this site:

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

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