



Pastures ABC's of Rotational Grazing

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What kind of fencing should I use?

It's your choice. But whatever you use, I suggest building as many permanent paddocks as you think you'll need. I think permanent fencing actually adds to your flexibility because you can hook up polywire almost anywhere if you need to subdivide further. The secret is to have enough permanent subdivisions in the system so you can't go wrong if your labor resources get stretched thin.

I'm wary of setting up systems that require you to move temporary fencing every time you move livestock. Moving wire is very labor intensive. Some farmers enjoy it. But for many, the thrill wears off pretty fast. Some say it only takes them 20 minutes to move fence. It takes me 10 minutes just to get my boots on and get out the door!

When there's a cold rain falling, you don't want to spend 20 minutes moving fence. That's why I suggest designing your permanent fencing so all you have to do is open a gate before going to supper.

What shape should my paddocks be?

For best use of forage, the closer to square your paddock is, the better. Rectangles are OK as long as they are not more than four times longer than they are wide. With longer rectangular paddocks, livestock will graze the gate ends more heavily than the far nooks and crannies. If you must build long paddocks, use polywire or other temporary fencing to break them up into shorter rectangles or squares.

How should I orient my paddocks on slopes?

Don't run rectangular paddocks up and down slopes, with gates and water at the bottom. Livestock will graze halfway up the slopes, then come back for water and start grazing again at the bottom. You end up with overgrazing at the low end and undergrazing at the far end. Whenever practical, make your paddocks run along the contour and run lanes up and down the slope.



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How tall should the pasture be when I start grazing?

With most improved pastures consisting of grasses like Brome, Fescue, Orchardgrass, and Timothy as well as legumes like Red Clover, Ladino Clover, and Birdsfoot Trefoil, I tell farmers to start grazing when the plants are about 8 to 10 inches tall. In early Spring, you can start grazing when the plants are about 4 to 6 inches tall. That saves you a few extra days of winter feed plus it helps stagger pasture re-growth a little bit.

Don't be tempted to start too soon or you'll damage the pasture and it won't recover. I'd rather have the grass ahead of the cows than the cows ahead of the grass. Don't start grazing in the same paddock every year.

When should I move livestock to new grass?

Some people will suggest that you graze pastures right down to the dirt before moving them. I don't. With the improved forage species I mentioned above, leave at least 2 to 3 inches of stubble so that there is enough leaf area to ensure quick re-growth. It's about 2 inches from the tip of my middle finger to the knuckle. I simply stick my hand down through the grass to the ground to measure it.

If you do not leave about 2 inches, those improved species won't bounce back quickly. Weeds and other less productive species will move in and take over. Also, if you leave livestock on too long, they will have to work too hard to get enough dry matter.

Should I drag my pastures?

With continuous grazing, dragging is almost a necessity. But once you get a good rotational system down, you probably won't need to drag very much. You'll find that the livestock will distribute the manure more evenly and the it will break up and disappear faster. You may still need to drag near waterers and loafing areas.

I've done everything that you suggested and I'm still not getting the production. What should I do?

First, you can live with pastures that aren't very productive even under intensive management. Cut down the number of animals you are grazing or increase your pasture acreage.



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The next troubleshooting step is to take a good hard look at your soil test. Ideally, you should test your soil before you set up your pasture system. But with the low priority most pastures have gotten in the past, soil testing usually comes as an afterthought.

Even if you do soil test first, don't run out and order enough fertilizer and lime to grow 10 ton per acre alfalfa. Most intensive grazing systems do just fine at moderate pH and fertility levels. If your soil is very acidic, lime to bring the pH up to about 6.0. Bring P and K levels up to the medium to high range suggested by your land grant university for grass/legume hay at yields appropriate for your fields.

Should I re-seed my pastures?

If production is still less than you want after correcting any fertility problems, consider changing your pasture species. From my experience, this should be a last resort. But, for years, it's been the first solution that people think of. The typical scenario is this: "Your pasture wears out. So you seed in some legumes or grasses and maybe put on some fertilizer. Then you go on grazing it continuously and the new species disappear again".

You've got to change your management first. When mismanaged, grazing animals are nothing more than destructive pasture predators that can eat themselves out of house and home. Until you control your animals, reseedling is a waste of time and money. Only after you have established the grazing system, soil tested, and fertilized should you even think about reseeding a pasture.

If you do re-seed, don't plow up your pasture. Frost-seed or drill new species into the existing sod. If you really did pick species that are better for your soils and management than the ones that are already there, the new ones will take over.

Develop a good grazing system and you will get several tons of the cheapest high-quality feed you've ever raised. It may be the best move you've ever made.