



Pastures

Pasture Seeding

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You've reached the point when the old pasture just ain't what she used to be. There are weeds coming out your ears, and you can't remember what a decent stand of grass looks like. You've tried fertilizer, liming and intensive pasture management and nothing has worked. It's time to stick a fork in the old pasture, she's done. Time to start over with a fresh seeding.

Perhaps the most important step to seeding a pasture is seed bed preparation. Your ideal seed bed will have fine textured soil with no big clumps, no large organic debris or rocks, and no weeds. Begin by controlling the weeds. Some people pull the weeds, some use chemicals. I'd try pulling first, and I'll tell you why. Chemicals are expensive and misuse can be dangerous. Pulling is safe and usually highly effective if you keep at it. Wear gloves when you pull, some weeds are toxic.

Next, til, disc or plow the soil into a fine texture and remove all large organic debris. Seed will dry out and die on clumps, sticks and such. Now it's time to think about fertilizer.

Fertilizer is necessary to get the seedlings off on the right foot. Some people use commercial fertilizer for seeding and some use manure. If you're a greenhorn, I'd go with commercial, and I'll tell you why. Manure quality varies and it's hard to tell how much nutrient content you have. If it hasn't been composted properly, it may have scads of weed seeds in it and that's about the last thing you want in a new seeding. It's also difficult to spread evenly, which is important for a new seeding. With commercial, you know what nutrients you're getting and how much. You'll have plenty of time later to learn about the use of manure fertilizer, which can be very effective after establishment.

Nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium are the main nutrients needed for growing grass. When you go to buy your fertilizer at the feed store, you will see three mysterious numbers on the front of the bag. They will look something like this: 12-4-8. The first number tells you how much nitrogen, the second how much phosphorous and the third how much potassium is in the bag. The higher the number, the more of that nutrient you have. A one hundred pound bag of 12-4-8 contains 12 pounds nitrogen, 4 pounds phosphorous and 8 pounds potassium. If you haven't added fertilizer to the pasture recently, you can safely go with 60 pounds nitrogen, 20 pounds phosphorous, 40 pounds potassium and 20 pounds sulfur per acre. You may have to buy the sulfur separately.

One to two tons lime per acre would also be beneficial. Lime increases the pH of your soil. Grass generally grows best at a neutral pH 6.5-7. If you have the time, it's best to get your soil tested before adding fertilizer or lime. The results will tell you the pH, current nutrient amounts available and how much extra you need for the new seeding.

Spread the fertilizer evenly on your seedbed with the spreader the feed store was kind enough to loan you. Drag the pasture to work the fertilizer into the soil. Something as simple as a section of chain link fence can make a suitable drag. Pack the seed bed so that standing on it leaves a footprint no deeper than ¼ inch. You can rent a roller from your local machinery rental company for this purpose.



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Now its time to apply the seed. Some go with the pre-mixed seed which has a catchy name on the bag and others buy seed one species at a time. I'd go with one at a time and I'll tell you why. Mixed seed often has several different species in it. It's likely many of them won't be appropriate for your soil. Also, different species have different growth habits, making management difficult. Choose a single grass and a single legume and you'll grow an easily managed, uniform pasture. For best results, inoculate legumes prior to seeding with the inoculant specific to the species. Legume inoculant is available at your local feed store. Seeding takes a lot of work, so don't scrimp on seed quality.

Your soil type will determine if a fall or spring seeding is best, and which seed species is most appropriate. Call the Conservation District at (206) 764-3410 for advice about selecting the right seed and seeding rate for you.

You can use the same spreader for seeding as you used for the fertilizer, but you may need to adjust the dial. Spread the legume separately from the grass. If different size seeds are spread together, distribution problems may result. Legumes fix nitrogen in the soil, which the grass plants will feed on. If you anticipate problems with broadleaf weeds, you may want to overseed the legume after the grass has established. This will give you more weed control options, as broadleaf herbicides will often kill legumes. Make sure you spread the seed evenly across the seedbed. After seeding, drag the seedbed again to work the seed into the soil and insure good seed-soil contact.

If you have excessively drained soil, you may want to add mulch to the seeding. Mulch will help retain the moisture necessary for seedling establishment and contribute to the organic matter content of the soil. Since mulch requires nitrogen to break down, add a little extra nitrogen at the fertilization stage.

It will take approximately 1 year for the grass to establish well enough to stand up to livestock pressure. Keep on top of any weed problem that may crop up, a few minutes here and there will save you headaches down the line. Get down on your hands and knees and pull on the tops of the new grass plants. If you can pull them out of the ground, your animals can too. Best to wait a little while longer.

After establishment, it's important to manage the pasture for long term productivity. It's easy to put too much pressure on a new seeding and end up right back where you started. You've invested time and money into your pasture and you want to make sure it lasts a good long time.

Some go with one big pasture and some divide it up into units. I'd go ahead and divide 'em up. If the livestock have access to all your pasture at the same time, they will end up trampling a lot of it. They'll also graze certain areas lower than others, leading to bare spots and weeds.

Divide your pasture into equal size units and rotate your livestock through them, making sure stubble height remains at 3" or greater. After turning livestock out of a pasture unit, clip the grass down to a uniform stubble height of 3" and drag the paddock to evenly distribute the manure. Let the paddock grow to 6" or more before grazing again.

Sit on your porch and admire the lush, green grass and your happy, healthy livestock. These are the fruits of your labor. Pat yourself on the back, you've done a fine job.