

News Column

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GOATS EAT TREES

If I were choosing a farm animal to do my lawn care for me, I'd go with sheep. Given a choice, sheep will eat weeds first, then grass, then woody plants. They should be perfect to maintain a landscape,.....as long as they aren't left in the yard long enough to start eating the shrubs.

As an old 4-Her, I learn by doing. When I tell you that pigs and lawns don't mix, I'm not just making it up. I've tried it. Pigs are reasonably good tillers, but terrible mowers. They will eat grass, but they tend to root it out of the ground first. When my pigs got out in my mom's lawn they made it look like it had been hit by a meteor shower. Or maybe a series of small land mines blew up in the front yard. It was a mess.

Cattle like grass and they do a nice job of keeping a lawn closely groomed. They aren't usually hard on bigger trees, but might accidentally trample small trees and shrubs. Negatives with cattle include their tendency to drop their fertilizer in big piles, and the craters they make when crossing the lawn after a big rain.

I can also warn you that bull fights in the front yard tear out a lot of grass, and bulls sometimes knock the bark off of big trees.

Goats would be decent lawn care professionals if you had only grass. They would also be OK if you lived in one of the southern states where your backyard was wilderness, and you didn't care if they ate the trees. Goats like woody plants and will eat the tender growth on your trees

and shrubs first. After they have destroyed your trees and shrubs, then they will eat weeds, leaving the lawn mowing as their final task.

In grazing management circles, multi-species grazing is often talked about, but not often practiced. At least not around here. On a large scale, I get it. Turning a bunch of sheep or goats out with a herd of cattle requires better fences, and better protection from predators. It could either work wonderfully, or it could be a wreck.

Because of their differing dietary preferences, complementary grazing with cattle, sheep, and goats can increase carrying capacity of a pasture. Diversity of forage types is necessary for complementary grazing to work. If a pasture has a mix of forbs, browse, and grasses, then it is a good candidate for complementary grazing.

Browse, by the way, is the tender growth of woody plants, generally small trees and shrubs that most cattlemen are trying to eradicate. Forbs are broadleaf plants that aren't trees, shrubs, or grasses. Weeds are forbs.

Cattle prefer grass and will consume 60% grass, 20% forbs, and 20% browse when given forage options. However, a summer diet that is 100% grass works just fine and that's what cattlemen strive to provide.

Goats prefer browse and will consume 50% browse, 30% forbs, and 20% grass when provided options. That's why goats are valuable for cleaning up areas that are overgrown with tree seedlings and weeds. They like that stuff.

Sheep work really well in empty cattle lots. They prefer forbs and will eat weeds before even looking for grass. In order of preference, sheep like 40% forbs, 40% grass, and 20% browse.

I recognize that most cattlemen aren't going to read this and decide sheep and goats need

to be added to their Christmas shopping list. However there is an important message here for cattlemen. Cattle eat weeds too.

While having a weed-free pasture may be good for your self-esteem, it may not be good for your pocketbook. Weeds in a pasture may be a sign of over-grazing and may signal a need to adjust stocking rates, but spending money on herbicides probably isn't the right choice.

A better choice – instead of trying to control pasture weeds with herbicides – would be to adjust the stocking rate, and let your cows eat the weeds until the problem fixes itself.

If you have questions, you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmcclure@ksu.edu.

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