

News Column

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GRAZING SHEEP ON ALFALFA

Do you ever have ideas you find so intriguing that you just can't seem to shake them? They just keep popping back into your mind, making you wonder why you haven't tried that yet.

Grazing sheep on dormant alfalfa is one of those things I should have tried when I had the opportunity 35 or 40 years ago. My cousin Alex planted the idea in my mind when he learned we had 100 acres of alfalfa on our Phillips County farm in the early 1980s. His immediate response was, "Why don't you buy two pot loads of lambs and finish them out on that over the winter?"

I never really gave much consideration to the lamb grazing idea – mostly because I knew we had a large coyote population – but it still made me think. Most alfalfa fields have 8 to 12 inches of growth, or more, when it freezes in the fall. Why not graze that off instead of letting it go to waste?

Sheep might have made us more money than cattle, but the truth is that we had "graduated" by the early 1980s and we were raising cattle and hogs at that time instead of the 400 ewes that Dad had when I was five. Dad had sheep knowledge, but I didn't know enough about sheep to be confident I could make it work.

Instead of grazing sheep, we ran cows across much of our alfalfa ground, from about December clear up to early June some years. Those of you with experience growing alfalfa are scratching your heads about now. Yes, we sometimes grazed the first cutting of alfalfa instead of

swathing and baling it. As you know, the first cutting of alfalfa is usually harvested in mid to late May.

After doing something for so many years, you eventually forget how it ever started, but my guess is the first time we grazed alfalfa late into the spring was a case of poor management. We probably couldn't get the cows out to pasture, and they weren't bloating and dying on the alfalfa, so Dad just left them there, grazing the alfalfa to the ground.

One thing we learned pretty quickly was that grazed alfalfa didn't have near the alfalfa weevil larvae damage as did un-grazed fields. The difference was dramatic. Where an electric fence ran across the corner of one alfalfa field, the grazed part was nice and green while the un-grazed portion was tattered, and the color of dirty snow with all the weevil damage.

I mentioned earlier that most fields will have 8 to 12 inches of growth remaining after the last cutting of alfalfa has been removed in the fall. That isn't always true, but it is true of the well-managed fields.

For stand longevity, and to assure good production the next spring, the last cutting in the fall should be made four to six weeks before a killing freeze, leaving 8 to 12 inches of foliage on the plant when it freezes. The reason for leaving so much growth is so the plants have time to store enough carbohydrates to survive the winter.

Immediately after cutting, alfalfa uses carbohydrate root reserves to regrow. Then, once the alfalfa reaches a height of 8 to 12 inches, plants start storing carbohydrates again. If root reserves aren't replenished before the first killing freeze, plants are more susceptible to winter damage and may not green up as early in the spring.

In northern Kansas, we recommend taking the last cutting of alfalfa in late September to allow enough time for adequate regrowth before a killing freeze. Some years you could harvest

later and be OK, but you're never really sure. To be assured of having the needed 8 to 12 inches of growth, late September is the safe date.

Some will harvest one more tie after a killing freeze. That works too, instead of grazing it off, but it can often be difficult to get alfalfa to dry down that late in the fall when it is cool and usually damp.

I like to graze dormant alfalfa, but leaving some cover to catch snow over the winter isn't a bad idea either. The important thing is to have that 8 to 12 inches of growth when it freezes. What you do after than is up to you.

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 gmclure@ksu.edu.

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