

Cattle Learn To Select Best Forages

GRANTVILLE (Dauphin Co.) — Animals on pasture have been working for millennia to perfect the process of forage selection at ground level, while university research on the process stretches back only about 50 years.

Determining exactly how a grazing animal can select for plant parts with protein levels differing sometimes to a minuscule percentage as part of the their genetic programming continues to receive university attention, according to a forage expert who spoke at this year's Pennsylvania Grazing and Forage Conference at the Holiday Inn, Grantville, in March.

"I put a lot of confidence in animals, in what they can do," said Jim Gerrish of the Forage Systems Research Center of the University of Missouri. Gerrish noted the grazing animals develop almost a "business sense" of how to select for improved nutrient value among the forages in the field, generation after generation.

And scientists are still trying to understand how.

In the meantime, work on improving forage quality continues at the university.

Gerrish spoke about steps to obtain and maintain pasture quality.

Gerrish noted that he had recently returned from a national symposium on forage quality. He examined a manual totalling 1,050 pages and managed to come up with a simple, working definition of forage quality: "low fiber, high protein, and tasting good," he said.

To do that, producers have to understand the reproductive growth of the



At the PFGC Grazing and Forage Conference in Grantville, speakers included, from left, Jim Gerrish, Jerry Swisher, Pete Levan, Tom Calvert, Alan Rotz, and Duane Hertzler.

forage and how to maintain that growth for optimum quality.

For many producers, using an intensive rotational grazing system can be more cost-effective when producing milk than when raising finishing calves or managing feeders.

But to obtain maximum forage quality, improve gain efficiency in the cattle, and boost milk production in the dairy herd, what happens in the paddocks between April 1 and May 15 can

spell success or doom for getting good pasture quality.

That time period "will dictate what we'll have in terms of quality the rest of the year," he said.

The key is to run short grazing periods with high stock density to manage the forage grazed. Those first six weeks of intense management is important, grazing them hard enough to keep them from stemming but not too hard that they can't recover.

And cool season grasses can be grazed through the season.

"Cool season grasses are not low quality in the summertime unless you allow them to stem," Gerrish noted.

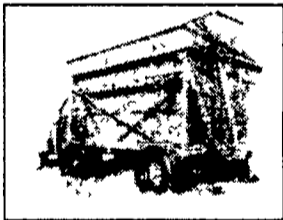
Time is critical when determining how to manage forage quality. Manage the pastures for animal intake needs.

Many grasses need to be maintained before extensive leaf, and eventually buds, appear on them. The closer to the

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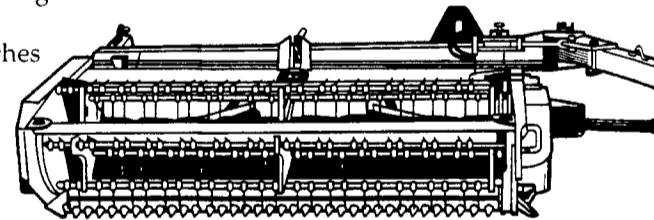
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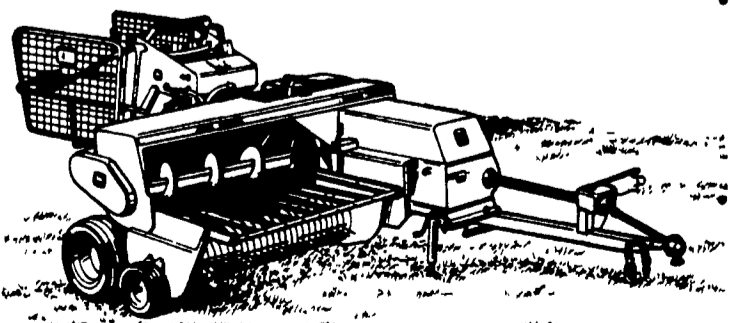
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