

Flexible Management

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for the Martins was that heifers mature rapidly on the ryegrass, freshening under 19 months of age and delivering good-sized calves.

In fact, heifers should have limited access to the ryegrass — they are in danger of getting fat from it, Martin said.

With the goal of reducing calf size for the earlier calvings, Martin had used a Jersey bull on several heifers that calved this spring, and found the calves still pushing 90-pound birth weights. The heifers gave birth, however, without significant trouble and have joined the milking herd with gusto.

This spring, the Martins grazed the herd into June, and also harvested three cuttings of ryegrass to fill the trench for winter feed. Intervals between cuttings are 18-20 days. During the spring growth flush, the herd can only keep up with grazing a portion of the 45 acres of ryegrass.

In June, the Martins lightly till the ryegrass ground in preparation for corn, which is planted densely at 45,000 plants to the acre.

"It is my summertime grass," Martin said of the

corn. He exploits the fact that corn grows best during the drier months of summer when other types of grass decline. This is a way of maximizing the use of the land. The dense corn stand reduces ear size, but Martin said it is primarily the forage he wants. He also noted, in spite of smaller ear sizes, the corn produces more ears.

"(The corn) ends up with a whole lot more leaves," he said. "The ear size is down, but you get twice as many ears."

While the corn grows during the hot summer months, the Martins tend to keep the cows in the freestall barn, switching back to a feeding program that consists mostly of TMR, rather than turning the cows out in the heat to pick through pastures that are less than lush.

"We don't like to make cows eat grass," Martin said. "We like to see them want to eat it."

After chopping the corn, the fields are seeded back into ryegrass in September. The herd can then graze intensively through the late fall. After last year's droughty summer, a mid-November rain grew the ryegrass to 10-12 inches



On a hot day on Myron Martin's farm, heifers graze in the foreground as milking cows help themselves to TMR in the comfort of the freestall barn.

tall, allowing the herd to graze past Christmas. At that point, young heifers were turned in and continued grazing into January, Martin said.

After being dormant for several months, the ryegrass grows aggressively again in the spring, requiring attentive and flexible management to harvest the most feed value most efficiently.

Martin said one mistake he made in the process of starting the grazing operation was installing permanent paddock fencing in the pastures. With much of grazing management depending on variable conditions, the switch to easily-moved temporary fencing has greatly increased the ability to give cows what they need on a day-to-day basis, he said.

Other forages grown on the farm include Alice clover, perennial ryegrass, orchardgrass, and alfalfa. These are also used for either grazing or chopping, depending on the time of year and conditions.

The TMR mix includes Marshall ryegrass and/or alfalfa, corn silage, pressed brewer's grain, fine ground corn, cotton seed, and minerals. During non-grazing season, the mix also includes soybean meal.

Combining grazing with traditional TMR feeding is a balancing act that requires flexibility and an open mind, according to Martin. He attri-



"I believe I do everything except plant corn," said Glendolyn Martin, 14. Here he feeds TMR to the milking herd.

butes a good deal of that attitude to his father, Glenn Martin, who was the first farmer in the area to own a no-till corn planter.

"The whole time, I'm learning more and more about the cows," Myron said. "I'm not close-minded to anything else. I don't want to get stuck here."

Introducing grazing into the operation has "really made things economical" without requiring anyone in the family to "work day and night," he said. With seven children being home-schooled on the farm, plus the care of two additional foster children, ages 3 and 1, time management is important.

Although, "you still have to be here twice a day," for milking, Janet Martin said the new freestall barn, which has eliminated the daily chore of scraping manure, has freed up a lot of time, enabling her husband to be the main schoolteacher in the home. Oldest daughter, Yolanda, has also taken over a lot of the teaching responsibilities.

In Myron Martin's view, it all adds up to the likelihood of being able to pass on a thriving dairy business to the next generation. It is also a cause for gratitude.

"I thank God that I can make a living farming," he said.

The Martins will open their farm to guests during two grazing walks scheduled this year: Aug. 29 and Dec. 5. To learn more, reach Myron at (301) 432-2974, or call Don Schwartz, Washington Co. extension, at (301) 791-1304.

Growth of Grazing In Maryland

According to Schwartz, about 30 Maryland dairy farmers have converted to one of two general types of grass-based operations in the past five years.

These include the "New Zealand" style graziers who have converted all of their cropland into perennial grasses and legumes, limit the feeding of grain, and may opt to milk only on a seasonal basis.

The others are referred to as "European" type graziers who complement TMR rations with the grazing of annual or perennial forages. The Martin dairy is a prime example of this type of operation.

A five-year financial summary (1996-2000) of 33 Maryland dairy farms showed the average net profit for 23 conventional dairy farms was \$387 per cow while 10 dairy graziers averaged \$582 per cow. Year-end data for 2000 showed early innovators of both grazing systems netted more than \$1,100 per cow, according to Schwartz. These systems provide a viable alternative to conventional dairy production by increasing profitability and sustainability in small dairy farms, he noted.

For some producers, large herd expansions with conventional management are not feasible — and increasing population and environmental regulations in the East make them even less so, according to Schwartz.

"We're not going to have California-size dairy farms in the Mid-Atlantic states," he said.



Holstein/Jersey crossbred calves will go on pasture at three months of age on the Martin farm.



Myron Martin checks first-calf heifers that freshened this spring at less than 19 months of age after grazing annual ryegrass.