

Masonic Homes' Shorthorns

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fenced, and he plans to convert another 200 acres to grass during the next two years.

"We can be more flexible now," Stoltzfus said of the reduced need for cropland to provide feed for the 140-cow Holstein herd, which was managed in a nongrazing setup.

Grass varieties he has seeded on the farm include perennial ryegrass, timothy, tall fescue, short season orchardgrass, smooth brome grass, and Kentucky bluegrass. The 60 acres of pasture fenced so far are divided into paddocks that radiate out from the central hay feeding station and handling facility.

The pasture is equipped with a series of circular, concrete, spring-fed waterers.

"It worked well this winter," Stoltzfus said of the gravity-fed watering system. "It never froze." Last summer, the waterers temporarily dried up during the extended drought but returned with the rains last fall.

A recently built outdoor feeding structure was designed to reduce feed waste and manure runoff and "keep cows out of the mud," Stoltzfus said. It consists of a sloping concrete pad with two rows of headlocks sandwiching a gated drive-through area where the hay is distributed. At the lower end of the feeding station, an excavated earthen basin catches the runoff and allows slow infiltration into the soil.

Manure is scraped to the end of the feeder and allowed to compost on its own. According to Stoltzfus, the composted manure becomes nearly as fine-textured as "chicken litter" before it is spread directly on the pasture.

At least for now, the added pasturelands at Masonic Homes are more for the sake of the brood cow herd than for the 60 or so head of beef finished on grain each year.

"Our goal at this point is to get as much out of the grass as we can for the cow herd," Stoltzfus said. He said he'd want to learn more about grazing before making the move toward finishing animals on grass.

The homegrown Shorthorn feeders finish at an average of 1,275 pounds at 14-15 months on grain, according to Stoltzfus. As an old English breed with similarities to Angus, "Shorthorns have a real good ability to marble," he said.

While most of the beef finished on the farm is direct-marketed to retail customers, the main focus of the Masonic Homes Shorthorn operation is on producing high-performance breeding stock.

An embryo-flushing program has been in place on the farm for about 10 years. The farm achieves a 65 percent conception rate for embryo transplants, with all the work done on site by local ET specialist Dr. Larry Kenel.

"Part of our success with the embryo work is that we do it all here," Stoltzfus said. "The embryos never leave the farm."

This year, six top cows are set to be flushed, with the embryos going into lower-quality heifer and crossbred carriers on the farm.

In addition to the embryo donor cows, about 25 females will be artificially inseminated and another 50 serviced by one of several bulls kept on the farm.

Stoltzfus uses other technologies as
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Elyssa Hevner halter-breaks Shorthorn calves on the farm during free time from her studies at Elizabethtown College.

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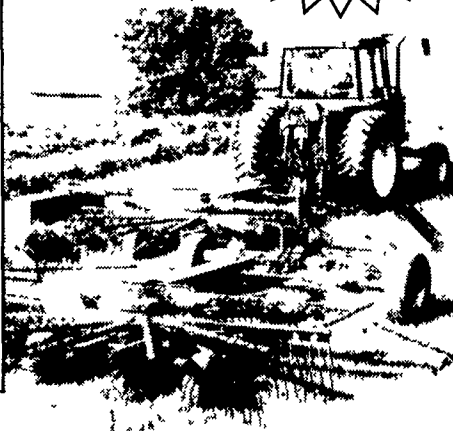
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