

GOOD ADVICE

Although experience is the best teacher, graziers can benefit tremendously from the experiences and advice of other grass-based farmers and grazing specialists. Successful graziers, like all entrepreneurs, are continually improving their systems, experimenting with new techniques, modifying their practice based on results. Graziers who keep an open mind, listen to new ideas and are willing to adapt are better prepared for unanticipated challenges. Many graziers say experimentation, innovation and discovery available in grazing is exactly what makes this kind of farming fun and never boring. In this section, contributors share some helpful tips and insights.

Top 10 Mistakes of New Graziers

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Over the last few years of developing grazing plans and seeing them implemented, I have watched some farmers take off in grazing, without looking back, and become very successful. Others never seem to get the hang of it. I have noted many reasons why people fail to set up and manage a viable grass-based livestock enterprise and have developed this list of top 10 mistakes in the hope that you might benefit from the mistakes made by someone else.

10. Did not remove all the old worn-out fencing and replace it with new, superior fencing. Many farmers struggle with old rusty worn-out fences. The worst is electrified barbed wire, which is notorious for shorts and voltage drop problems. In order to properly manage your pasture, old interior fences that are in the way must also be removed. I encourage the use of half-way decent fences, especially perimeter fences. When possible, take old fences down and buy high quality tensile fencing products that will last for decades. The name of the game is labor efficiency and flexibility. If your old system slows you down or does not work, replace it.

9. Bought inferior products that don't last. In the effort to save a buck, many people buy poor quality fencing, watering products and/or poor quality seed and seed mixes. Many of these products are either hard to work with or break down in a couple of years. Seek out the names of high quality grazing products from other graziers. You may spend more initially, but it will save you time and money down the road. Remember you are setting this grazing system up to save time, as well as earn some additional money. In this case, it pays to spend a little more to make more in the long run. Do it right the first time.

8. Did not believe that good management improves the quality and quantity of the pasture. Too many people are looking for the secret recipe, when it takes long term commitment and management to create and maintain high quality pastures. High quality pastures don't just happen. They are the result of years of excellent management, not weeks or months or some secret seed mix or some magic fertilizer.

7. Believed plowing improves a pasture. Refer to number 8. In some cases frost seeding, interseeding or reseeded a pasture may help to improve the species of plants that are present in a paddock, but it is long term management that will determine what a pasture will look like 5 or 10 years down the road.

6. Did not commit an adequate amount of the best land to grazing. Too many people decide to graze, but decide they are only going to try a few acres. Sorry folks, if you want to graze for 1/2 to 2/3 of the year you have to commit 1/2 to 2/3 of your acreage to pasture. In North Central Wisconsin it takes about an acre to raise 3 tons of high quality pasture, which is roughly the forage needed for a 1 000# critter for 6 months of the year. If you start out with less acreage per animal, you will run out of grass. If you study the grass growth curves for the growing season, you should realize grass does not grow at a constant rate throughout the grazing season. You may need only .5 acre per animal early in the year, but by the end of the grazing season need 1.5-2 acres per animal, when the grass growth slows. Flexibility is the key. Fence in the largest acreage that is feasible, mechanically harvest excess growth early in the year and let livestock graze more acres late in the grazing season, thereby extending your days on grass.

5. Spent lots of money on “Silver Bullet” grasses, legumes and products. No doubt about it, there are many better grass and legume varieties to choose from than there were 10 years ago. Too many people look for that perfect plant for the whole farm and there are plenty of people willing to sell you that perfect seed (snake oil). In general, seed down new fields with late maturing varieties of grasses and legumes that grow on your soils, in your climate. Again, consult other graziers. Don't seed your farm down to all of one seed or seed mix. Good quality, late maturing seed is not cheap but if you are paying more than two or three dollars per pound you better have some mighty strong proof that the seed you are buying will do everything that is promised. The same goes for products. There are plenty of people willing to sell you the next best thing, when good management is what you need. Strive to achieve diversity amongst your pastures, but not too much within. Refer to #8.

4. Failed to manage pasture fertility properly. Refer to #8 again. A good fertility management program is needed to grow high quality pastures and to even out the growth curve of pastures, especially when starting out grazing. Whenever possible, take advantage of all farm sources of fertility. Manure is the cheapest source of fertilizer you have, so manage it properly. If you are buying feed, you are buying fertilizer for your farm. Whether you are getting your fertility from on-farm manure and/or compost sources, buying commercial fertilizer, having legumes provide nitrogen or depending on some other strategy, be sure that pasture fertility is part of your management plan. Be aware that small frequent applications are more beneficial than large single season applications of fertilizer, especially nitrogen. One more thing to watch is excess nutrient buildup. By buying outside sources of commercial fertilizer or feed you are bringing extra fertility on to your farm. Make sure that phosphorus and potassium do not build to excessive levels. Remember, with good grazing management manure, is being applied at a fairly even rate over your pastures and that after 3-5 years the manure applied by the grazing livestock will meet needs of the plant, for the most part.

3. Did not plan for a decent lane system on dairy farms. Ninety percent of the time you can get away with having poor quality lanes, but it is that ten percent of the time that is the killer. When your pasture management is dictated by the condition of your lanes, you need to spend a few bucks on building some decent lanes for your cows. I see it happen in early spring and late fall and when we get a month where it doesn't stop raining. Sooner or later, if you don't have good lanes, your pasture management will suffer because you cannot get your cows out to the pasture that needs to be grazed. With good lanes, some graziers get

nearly a month earlier start on the grazing season because they do not have to wait for the mud in their lanes to dry in the spring. The same goes at the other end of the calendar, when there are beautiful fields of grass ready, but the lanes are too muddy and do not dry off any more that late in the year. I have also seen cows not on pastures in the middle of the summer because, after 5-10 inches of rain in the one week, they are belly deep in mud. One of the reasons people graze, is that it is hard to put up high quality stored feeds. If your cows cannot get to high quality pasture, you are no better off than before you were grazing.



Not the best way to test your electric fence.

2. Failed to plan and implement a smooth and efficient transition to a grazing system.

A new grazier must have a plan to succeed. This includes a grazing plan on how the system, including lanes, water and fencing, will be installed and how the pastures will be managed. Equally important is a business plan, which lays out how finances will be managed and how the business will be implemented and run. Once the plans are developed and the skills to implement them acquired, these plans must be implemented in an efficient manner. If transition to a grass based livestock system is drawn out, the efficiencies of the system are never realized and you may end up with more work. If you are transitioning from an existing conventional setup this is especially true. You may end up just adding another hour to your day if, failing to fully implement your plan, you get stuck between two systems, with all your old baggage. If you truly believe in the system and believe you have the skills to implement it **DO IT NOW**.

1. The number one mistake made by new and *experienced* graziers is the failure to continue to learn the system. It is critical to develop a grazing mindset. You must continue to question everything, continually improve on what you are doing so you can make the most cost-effective decisions possible. Many new graziers come to one or just a few pasture walks or meetings and think they know it all. This is probably the biggest mistake you can make. Good grazing is an art as well as a science and it takes many years to learn. Granted, some basic pasture walks become repetitious but there are usually a few tips to pick up and the small discussions that take place among graziers at the walks always provide new ideas. Advanced grass series are sure to make you think, while conferences, books, magazines and the Internet are also great places to continue the learning process and bring you ideas from around Wisconsin, the U.S. and the world. At the end of your career, don't end up with one year of experience thirty times, end up with a **full thirty years of experience**.