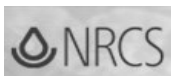




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## PASTURE: It's a War Out There!

By John Zinn, Grazing Specialist

We tend to think of pastures as a peaceful, serene place. However, there is a constant, intense competition for light, moisture, nutrients and space going on between plants.

There is grazing pressure from small and large critters alike. The plants that are nutritious and palatable to livestock are also nutritious and palatable to hosts of small mammals, insects, bacteria, and fungi.

Plants have developed defense mechanisms over time to reduce grazing. Some of the defenses include, thorns, spines, hairs, and just tasting really bad! Chemical compounds such as terpenes, tannins, and alkaloids, limit intake and help prevent over grazing by small and large animals. Ingesting too much of these compounds can cause nausea and in some extreme cases even death. Humans have worked to breed these compounds out of our pasture forages, which puts them at a disadvantage compared to weeds that compete for light, moisture, and nutrients. It is no wonder that continuous heavy grazing over time increases the population of thistles, multiflora rose, and other species with defenses.

Some plants form an alliance with a microorganism to help defend themselves. Some of the older varieties of tall fescue had an endophytic fungus, in other words it actually lived in the plant, that produced bitter alkaloids to provide a defense from grazing.

Other strategies plants use to survive are producing large amounts of seed like Timothy, developing rhizomes like Quackgrass, and forming a dense colony of clone plants in concentric rings around themselves like Orchardgrass. Some plants like the White Dutch clover and Kentucky Bluegrass, can survive close grazing by keeping their growing points close to the ground and forming a dense mat of vegetation that doesn't allow for seeds of other species to germinate.

As a pasture manager being aware of the struggles of the forage plants we want to preserve can help us to consider how our management of defoliation with domestic livestock can either increase, maintain or decrease the concentration of desirable species. Managing grazing height, soil compaction, and plant traffic damage are benefits of a rotational grazing system that translate to higher yields of desirable plants.

**UPCOMING EVENT: Pasture Walk & Manure Management Discussion**

September 15 ~ Bob Scanlan Farm, Root River SWCD

# SHOULD I CLIP MY PASTURE?

By Travis Meter, University of Illinois Extension Educator

A frequent question in early summer is "Should I clip my pasture?" In most cases, the farmer is seeking a yes or no answer and hopefully validation of their current practice. Unfortunately, the answer is somewhat dependent on your previous pasture management and current grazing system. If you have pastures with heavy weed pressure, encroaching woody species, and a predominantly continuous grazing system, then clipping pastures is most likely needed. It is mostly needed for weed control. However, it will also re-set forages promoting a more even grazing pattern in summer and early fall. If you are utilizing a rotational grazing system with frequent rotations, then clipping may not be worth it. Multi-species grazing will also help control weeds and promote uniform grazing. Improving your management with rotation(rest), stocking rates to match forage growth curves, and multiple species for uniform grazing will be more viable than clipping.

## Pros

- ◆ Weed control/ control of less-desirable species/lower need for herbicide weed control
- ◆ Uniform regrowth of vegetative plants results in higher quality pasture and more intake
- ◆ Allow sunlight to reach down into preferred plants in the stand
- ◆ Eliminates seed heads and reduces eye irritation (helps prevent pinkeye, fescue foot)
- ◆ "Looks good"(may be a factor if you are renting pasture)

## Cons

- ◆ Fuel, equipment, labor costs
- ◆ Exposes soil to sunlight, raising soil temp. (bad for soil biology and cool season plants)
- ◆ Reduces natural re-seeding of plants
- ◆ Clipping pastures in the boot stage of the plant can deplete root reserves
- ◆ Mowing too close to the ground can remove too much leaf and stunt plant regrowth

Clipping pastures is a form of mechanical weed control. It can have other benefits, but those benefits must be weighed against the costs that are associated with mowing pastures. In most cases, clipping pastures is a very low return on investment practice and results on no return on investment in many years. Developing a rotational grazing system with frequent rotations and adequate rest will result in more return on investment and reduce the time and money spent on mowing pastures.





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