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PLANNING for TOMORROW'S FARMING



Productive Pastures
By: John D. MacLeod, Director, Crops, Weeds and Seed Branch, Ontario Department of Agriculture, Toronto.

(NOTE—This is the third in a series of comments by well-known authorities, written expressly for the Weekly Press of Ontario.)

The progressive livestock farmer is always concerned with the problem of lowering the cost of producing livestock and livestock products without sacrificing quality. This can be accomplished by improving pasture which is our cheapest feed crop.

In addition to producing digestible nutrients at lower cost than any other crop on the farm, a well-managed pasture has the following advantage — it maintains livestock for five or six months of the year at low feed and labor cost; milk and beef are produced 50 to 75% cheaper on pasture than under winter feeding conditions; pasture is digested 83%, hay only 52%; pasture is our cheapest source of protein — 16 to 25%, which is about twice as much as that in the same grain cut for hay; no loss of food nutrients from curing, which in hay amounts to 40 to 50%; high in essential minerals which are easily assimilated from grass in the young stage, and in essential vitamins (an excellent source of all the vitamins needed for efficient production and reproduction); pasture sod prevents soil erosion, adds fibre and organic matter and improves the soil structure.

Type of farming, soil and climatic conditions and length of time the field is to be left in sod are factors which must be considered when planning pasture crops to be sown. Where possible the mixture should contain some deep-rooted legumes which help to maintain soil fertility and drought-resistant grasses which will provide grazing during the dry summer period. A well-balanced mixture is recommended for the following reasons — grasses and clovers vary widely in their ability to withstand soil and climatic conditions, therefore, when only one species is sown the results may be good or bad. Moreover, each species has its peak production period, and produces little in "off" seasons. By sowing a suitable mixture a thicker stand is obtained, and this naturally results in a heavier yield and more uniform grazing throughout the growing season. Cattle always prefer a mixture and thrive better on it than when grazing upon either grass or clover alone. The variety of herbage provided increases both palatability and nutrient value. There is less tendency for cattle to bloat, a condition which frequently occurs when they

are grazed on legumes alone, than when grasses are included in the mixture with clovers.

Pasture crops may be divided into four groups — annual or supplementary pastures, one to two years; short term hay pastures, two to four years; long term pastures, four to ten years; permanent or unworkable pastures which will remain in sod for an indefinite period. Rye, oats and sweet clover, and Sudan grass have proved best for annual or supplementary pasture. Sudan grass sown alone or in combination with oats has proved particularly good during that hot, dry period in July and August when other pasture crops are not so productive. In planning a hay-pasture mixture, it is recommended that a few pounds of such seeds as Orchard grass and Parkland Brome be included, in order to add leafiness and feeding value to the hay crop and to make a thicker bottom for pasture. When planning a long-term pasture, it is advisable to sow only grasses and clovers which are persistent and remain productive over a period of years. Much heavier rates of seeding are also advisable in order to produce and maintain a thick stand. It is essential that the seed bed be in a high state of fertility, well drained, reasonably free from weeds and well prepared. A fine, firm seed bed will permit shallow seeding, maintain moisture and enable young seedlings to establish a firm root. Only adapted seed of good quality, high germination and free from noxious weeds should be sown.

The seed should be thoroughly mixed before seeding and should not be sown more than one-quarter to one-half inch deep on heavy soils and one-half to one inch deep on lighter soils. The most common and usually most convenient practice is to seed the mixture in the spring with a nurse crop, preferably of early oats, and not too heavy.

To produce and maintain a good pasture requires a higher level of soil fertility than for most other crops. Moisture permitting, pastures grow from early spring to late autumn — five to six months of the year, hence, they are continually drawing on soil fertility. When the fertility level drops, the clovers and the more productive grasses are succeeded by less desirable species and weeds. All pasture crops require nitrogen, phosphorus and potash. Nitrogen is essential for

promoting the growth of grasses while phosphorus and potash encourage the growth of clovers, therefore if the pasture consists largely of grasses a high nitrogen fertilizer is advisable. If clovers predominate, the fertilizer should contain high percentages of phosphorus and potash. Soil tests will indicate the relative amounts of each to supply. Lime where required should also be applied. The best time to apply fertilizer on pastures is in late September and early October. The next best time is in early spring before seeding commences. Late spring and early summer applications seldom produce satisfactory results unless the season is very moist. One of the chief causes of poor pastures is low fertility. Five to ten loads of manure applied every two to three years will easily double the grazing capacity of a pasture.

In the case of fields which have been seeded to a short-term hay and pasture mixture, it will probably be found advisable not to pasture the new seeding until the following year unless the crop is unusually strong.

In the case of long-term pastures,

grazing may be permitted eight to ten weeks after date of seeding. In fact, this is desirable as tramping of soil around young plants will assist them in establishing a strong root. Close grazing is recommended to prevent coarse growth and thus keep the herbage in as palatable and nutritious a condition as possible. If there is too much growth for the available live stock

to graze uniformly or if it becomes weedy or patchy, it should be mown. Mowing when the grasses are just beginning to head out, will promote an aftermath of tender nutritious herbage as well as prevent a coarse stand of mature plants. The livestock will consume much of the mown grass on the field.

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trols and price ceilings. We must support and urge the support of rationing. We must buy only what we need, and only at fair markets.

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