Alfalfa: Not Just Another Pretty Hay

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**Alfalfa is a** cool-season perennial legume produced mostly for hay—typically for dairy hay markets, but also for beef cattle as a winter protein supplement. Its value as a hay or feed supplement is well recognized, but its usefulness as a grazing forage is often overlooked. Efficiency of harvest by baling, as well as the price structure for high quality hay, leads to alfalfa being used primarily as hay, but there is much untapped potential for alfalfa in grazing scenarios.

In the early 1990s, the introduction of Alfagraze, the first alfalfa variety tolerant of intensive grazing, along with easy-to-use electric fencing options, increased interest in using alfalfa as grazed pasture. There are now several grazing-tolerant varieties on the market developed with the “Alfagraze” approach, including a new “Roundup Ready” variety. These grazing alfalfas have utility as hay and grazed pasture.

What are some of the opportunities for grazing alfalfa? Let’s list a few.

1. **Fall stockpiled for weaned calves**
   Defer the last cutting on a convenient pasture and allow alfalfa to stockpile from September until weaning or frost. Place weaned calves on high quality pasture five to six days post-weaning (after the bow-out phase) and hold until marketing or until winter pasture is ready. Before allowing the calves into the alfalfa field, introduce them to alfalfa hay in the weaning pens.

2. **Summer pasture for growing and lactating stock**
   In areas east of I-35, where haying alfalfa is difficult, establish a grazing alfalfa for growing cattle and lactating cows. Alfalfa would be in excess in the spring, as would cool-season annual grasses, but it would continue to grow through the summer at a slower rate. Grazed rotationally, alfalfa could, in effect, be harvested in a timely and controlled rate by cattle. Use excess growth in the spring to flush calving cows prior to the breeding season.

3. **Creep feed for calves during the growing season**
   Plant a couple of drill-widths of alfalfa in the pasture to be grazed by calves. Cattle develop the best body condition in early winter when utilizing a controlled protein supplement.
alfalfa along the edges of perennial warm-season pastures (one or two sides, for example). Place a temporary, single-strand, electric fence between the alfalfa and warm-season forages. Allow calves to use alfalfa as a creep area through the summer and fall. After frost and in the early spring, allow cows access to alfalfa to graze residual in the winter and the excess in the early spring.

4. **Summer pasture for fall-born stockers**
   Establish alfalfa and graze weaned calves or stockers each spring to carry calves to heavier market weights. For example, the Foundation’s Forage Improvement Division grazed stockers on alfalfa for two years beginning in the fall of 2002. Spring gains approached 3 lb/hd/day, with gains above 1.5 lb/hd/day throughout the growing season (April through September). The exception was during the extreme dry period of summer 2003, in which gains dropped below 1.5 lb/hd/day in July and August. Under usual and customary practices, the steers would have been removed prior to drought conditions, but, due to the experimental design, the steers remained throughout the season. Although bloat could be a problem, there was no incidence of bloat in this study.

5. **Complementary cow forage**
   Interseed alfalfa in strips or blocks large enough to manage into perennial warm-season pasture such as bermudagrass. For mature cattle, 10 percent to 20 percent of a pasture should be sufficient. This will require killing the bermudagrass with a glyphosate treatment prior to planting the alfalfa. By rotationally grazing, stand life can be extended, but the aggressive nature of bermudagrass will eventually overwhelm the alfalfa within a couple of growing seasons (alfalfa stand life is extended if hayed only). The presence of alfalfa in the pasture will increase diet quality of grazing cattle, especially during summer months, which will improve livestock performance.

6. **Food plots for white-tailed deer**
   Plant alfalfa in planned food plots, protected from livestock, for use by white-tailed deer and other wildlife species during summer and fall. It may require occasional mowing or grazing by livestock to keep it in a productive, more desirable state.

   Here are some management tips if planting alfalfa for grazing:
   1. Target productive, well-drained soils with little potential for herbicide carryover.
   2. Test topsoil and subsoil, and apply lime, if needed, to raise pH to 6.5 to 7.0 and the needed P and K, and to meet alfalfa requirements.
   3. Use a proven, grazing-tolerant variety of alfalfa.
   4. Plant alfalfa at 15-20 lb seed/ac less than one-half inch deep into a firm seedbed, or no-till into a chemically fallowed soil in the early fall. Plant pre-inoculated or freshly inoculated seeds. Control weeds with appropriate herbicides.
   5. Allow alfalfa to attain early bud stage before initiating grazing in the spring. Rotationally graze, leaving residuals in excess of 8 inches throughout the growing season. Harvest the excess as hay, if possible.
   6. Allow alfalfa to stockpile in the fall at least 30 days before the historic first annual freeze date. Graze to 2-3 inch height during the winter to minimize weevil damage. Apply recommended fertilizer before spring green-up.

   Once established, continue to monitor soil nutrients and provide amendments, such as phosphorus, potassium and other essential nutrients to increase stand life and to enhance production, every couple of years if grazed and more frequently if hayed occasionally.