

Bush-Hogging Pasture

—Ulf Kintzel

Photos by Author

“You bush-hog too much” said my friend David H. Perhaps it was said to stir up a topic where we disagree, since we agree most of the time. Easy for him to say, I thought rather defensively, he has lots of rye grass, which never grows too tall. I on the other hand have mostly orchard grass, which can grow up to your waist or even your chest if unchecked. However, opposing views or disagreements often yield the most thought process. His comment did exactly that. It made me think about and reflect on bush-hogging throughout the entire “bush-hogging season” which actually lasts only a couple of months. In this article I will share my observations and conclusions.

Usually, grass starts growing in late March to early April around here. I farm in the western Finger Lakes area and the reader must take into account that a different timeline may apply for him or her, depending on the onset of grass growth and its speed of growth in his or her region. I usually can stop feeding hay sometime in early April, this year being the exception when I stopped feeding hay in mid-March. This early grazing, as sparse as it may be at first, has not only cost-saving benefits, it also reduces the amount and height of seed stems later on and makes the grass develop more tillers. It also keeps competitive weeds in check, allowing less competitive but more desirable species to compete better.

This year I had more animals than usual due to a larger early lambing season. The effect it had on the development of seed stems was enormous; there were far fewer and shorter seed stems than in previous years. Although I have heard much advice against early grazing, in my experience it does not reduce total yield throughout the season as long as you truly rotate frequently and leave enough time for each cell to rest in between grazings. But you don’t have to take it from me. A fairly recent field trial conducted in Wisconsin by Geoff Brink at the U.S. Dairy Forage Research Center with grazing heifers showed no significant reduction in total yield when grazing pastures early as long the pasture received enough rest time and was allowed to grow high enough during later rotations. Since this confirms my experience, it also settles this topic for me and I continue grazing just as soon as the grass wants to green up. But I digress, back to the topic.

Although scarce in April, grass becomes plentiful in a rather short amount of time by early May. While I graze short in April, I can’t keep up anymore when the grass takes off in May. In fact, I make sure my first rotational schedule does not go beyond 30 days, rather than the usual 5 to 6 weeks, simply to avoid losing palatability. Old grass and grass too tall is less tasty, less nutritious, and less digestible. Of course, such a rapid rotational schedule necessarily leaves lots of residual behind; residual being the few inches of live and green grass that



Fall At The Farm: I admit, wanting the farm look neat does enter into the decision-making process when bush hogging.

remains after grazing. It also does no longer keep undesirable weeds in check that the sheep would chew down in early spring. Seed stems have a chance too to keep growing at this time. After this initial and true round of rotation, which ends, depending on the year, about early to perhaps mid June, I usually do not bush-hog. A couple of exceptions apply. There are a few spots with Canadian thistles in a reseeded field that are quite resilient. They get knocked down early on. Much has been said about teaching livestock to eat undesirable weeds. If you are one of those who has figured out how to do it and has maintained high gains that rival grain-fed lambs, please tell me your secret. I have not been successful but will give it another try next year according to what I learned from Jim Gerrish. Thus far, I prefer clipping the weeds that my sheep don't eat and maintaining the extraordinary weight gains my lambs have on pasture.

Generally speaking, I bush-hog for two reasons. The first is weed control and the second is keeping grass palatable. This early in the season some weeds just grow back and the grass that had just been grazed down will grow back with plenty of palatable leaves. Grass has to grow seed stems first in order to make bush-hogging meaningful. Once a plant of grass puts its effort into growing a seed stem, it develops fewer palatable leaves. Once the seed stem has developed seed it will dry up and the plant will return to producing leafy blades of grass. Bush-hogging the seed stems once they are developed shortens that cycle and leads again to development of palatable leaves. (On the other hand, bush-hogging the seed stem after it dried up serves no meaningful purpose.)

The second rotation of the year shows a different picture. First, the rotational schedule has now slowed down to five to six weeks. Secondly, many weeds start developing blossoms or start to blossom, an ideal time to cut them back and impair their growth for at least this season or perhaps to kill them off for good. While thickness of the grass and legumes is the best preventer of undesirable weeds, some of my newly purchased or newly seeded pasture has not been pastured long enough yet to have developed such density. The bull thistle is the biggest culprit among the undesirable weeds growing in these fields. "Cut them in June and you see them again soon. Cut

them in July and you can say good-bye." My friend David told me that, and I found it to be true. This year I neglected this saying a little and cut some of them in early June. July came around and they had grown right back as if cutting them had never happened. June and July is also the time when one sees seed heads fully developed and the grass is at its least palatable stage. That is a good time to decide whether or not a cell should be bush-hogged after it has been grazed. Since my rotational schedule exceeds one month, I cannot keep all my bush-hogging restricted to the ideal time to both control undesirable weeds and to keep the grass palatable. So some of the clipping starts as early as mid to late June—a bit too early; and some of it goes into August—a bit too late. I know that is imperfect, but so is farming. You don't draw it up on a piece of paper. It's more like the rest of life: full of compromises. If I had a say in it, I would have given the month of July somewhere between 35 to 42 days, the ideal time frame for my rotational schedule. But I wasn't asked when they made the calendar.

Whether or not I bush-hog a particular cell after grazing depends on basically three factors: 1. The weed load: Too many weeds like bull thistle, Canadian thistle, burdock, or multiflora rose means it will be bush-hogged. 2. Palatability: If the seed stems of particularly orchard grass are too numerous and too high, it too needs bush-hogging. My few stands of rye grass, fescue, and meadow fescue are most often not clipped. 3. Thickness of grass: If the stand of grass needs to be thickened, I prefer letting the grass reseed itself. I have made great experiences doing so with native orchard grass, a grass very well suited for sheep grazing. Of course, once it reseeded itself, the seed stem dries up and bush-hogging no longer serves a purpose as far as palatability of the grass is concerned.

Whenever I do bush-hog, I leave enough residual. A pasture looking like a lawn is not the desirable end game. In fact, that is very counterproductive since it inhibits regrowth. Usually, I leave the stubble four to five or even six inches high. When I hit a patch of Canadian thistle I set the bush hog briefly lower—so low that it scratches the ground, but I will immediately go back to high residual once I have passed that patch.



