

Setting Up Grazing Cells

Photos by Author

—Ulf Kintzel

Setting up grazing cells is a big part of rotational grazing. It is a time-consuming part of raising sheep because setting up and taking down temporary fencing is required. It is far more involved than handling temporary fencing for cattle and dairy cows because it requires setting up grazing cells with either several strands of poly wire or electric nettings.

How I set up grazing cells is among the frequently asked questions I receive in emails or on social media. What appears to often be the case is that the perceived need of having to move water, fence charger, provided shade, and so forth for each pasture shift keeps people from rotating once daily and they resort to a much longer pasture shift, often up to five days long or even longer. Such long pasture shifts cut quite deeply into the productivity of a forage-based sheep farm. It comes both at the expense of proper pasture management and the growth rate of the sheep and lambs.

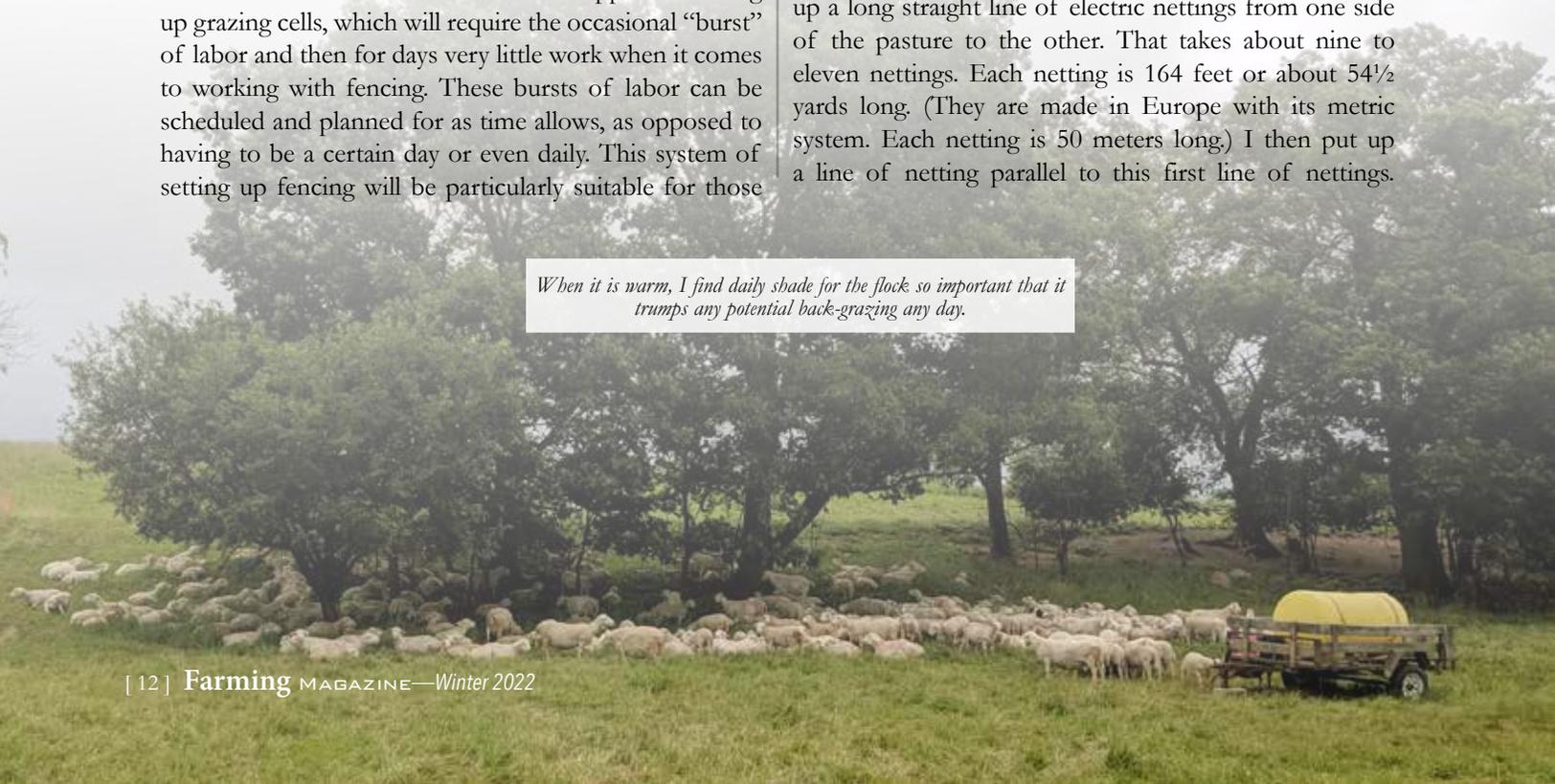
In this article I will outline how I approach setting up grazing cells, which will require the occasional “burst” of labor and then for days very little work when it comes to working with fencing. These bursts of labor can be scheduled and planned for as time allows, as opposed to having to be a certain day or even daily. This system of setting up fencing will be particularly suitable for those

sheep farmers who have a day job and raise sheep as an additional means of income. I received feedback to my system all the way from Oklahoma to Maine after outlining my approach to people asking. They all stated it worked well for them. Today I am sharing it with all of you. It is a simple system, easily replicated.

Let’s start by disposing the widespread notion that a daily grazing cell is set up for a day and a day only and then the next day the entire setup has to be replicated and the old setup has to be taken down. That is not at all the case. Instead, I set up grazing cells in one swoop for a week and up to nine days with divider fences for the daily pasture shift. Here is how I do it:

I have a permanent woven wire fence around my farm with a hot wire on top, which acts both at the starting (on one side) and an end point (on the opposite side) for my “long sides” of electric fencing. For the sake of this discussion, the starting and end points can be electric fencing set up at the borders of your property as well; it does not have to be permanent fencing. I set up a long straight line of electric nettings from one side of the pasture to the other. That takes about nine to eleven nettings. Each netting is 164 feet or about 54½ yards long. (They are made in Europe with its metric system. Each netting is 50 meters long.) I then put up a line of netting parallel to this first line of nettings.

When it is warm, I find daily shade for the flock so important that it trumps any potential back-grazing any day.



Naturally, the length is similar. I leave about 80 to 100 yards in between these two lines of nettings, depending on how convenient it is to put the fence lines through my hedgerows, which have several spots where I had some excavating done to level the ground.

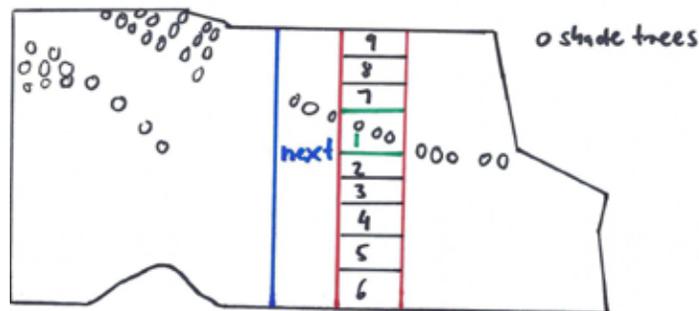
Then I put dividers in, also using electric nettings. My starting point is the available shade. That will be the first cell to be grazed. (This cell is marked green in the drawing). The water trailer is parked next to this cell. The water troughs are in that cell, placed along the fencing, albeit always outside the shade! The remainder of the dividers are put up with the thought in mind that each grazing cell should last one day.

Such work takes me approximately half a day. Depending on the season and thus the size of the flock, I now have approximately six or eight or ten grazing cells prepared, again depending on the size of the flock at any given time and also depending on the varying width of my farm.

The dividers are usually two nettings each, often overlapping just a bit. That means the approximate width of a grazing cell is no less than 80 yards and up to about 100 yards. I take down two nettings daily in the morning to allow access to the next grazing cell. How long does that take? I was asked that question by a person who came for individual consulting services. I asked him to time me as I took down a netting. I did it in just under a minute and a half. Two nettings would be three minutes, rolling them up will add a little. And then add another minute or two to observe as the sheep enter the next grazing cell so you know if there is an animal that needs to be taken care of. Let's even add a few minutes that it might take to get from your house to the sheep and back. Once added up, that whole exercise may take 15 minutes. It then becomes hard for anyone to convince me they don't have time for a daily pasture shift because of an off-farm job. Everybody should have 15 minutes before or after a job when raising sheep or perhaps they should not raise any at all. The hard work of setting up new grazing cells can be done when time allows, perhaps over the weekend. Naturally, it takes good discipline to manage one's time to do it that way.

When these grazing cells are about to be grazed, I set up a new parallel fence line along one of the existing "long sides." (That is the blue line in the drawing.) That means when I set up a new series of grazing cells, I most often only have to put up one long side while one of the old ones will be used again. In fact, as time allows, I often use the divider nettings that I take down daily and set them up right away in the pasture next to me.

Grazing cells setup



The drawing of my grazing cells setup indicates the electric fencing (black, green, and blue lines). It also indicates my availability of trees and hedgerows for shade (black circles).

I use this system for the parts of the season when shade and water is needed. Cooler temperatures, starting in September and definitely in October, no longer require shade and are often no longer included in my planning. I may also not always set up grazing cells for more than a week in advance and only for four or five days. However, the greater picture always is that I set up a larger paddock with dividers, which I remove on a daily basis.

By now you probably ask yourself "Oh my, how

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many rolls of nettings does this guy have?" The answer is, more than 50. The rule of thumb is that you can never have too many nettings. When you have a sizable flock of several hundred sheep as I do, the investment will be justified. If your flock is significantly smaller, you will need far fewer nettings. But in the end, it is true that a significant amount of investment in temporary fencing is required, an investment that goes well beyond the need for electric fencing for a single day.

Can all this be done with several strands of poly wire and step-in fence posts instead of the electric nettings I use? Absolutely. There are many who do exactly that. It will come down to personal choice. Having worked with both many years ago, I do not find strands of poly wire as effective at keeping in sheep, particularly lambs. They are definitely not as effective at keeping dogs and coyotes out. Electric nettings do a far better job in that regard, especially when it comes to keeping small lambs in and coyotes out. The opposing argument against electric

nettings and in favor of polywire is speed. Many people claim that setting up and taking down polywire fencing is faster. That might be true when you are new to electric nettings. I recall my introduction to electric nettings 32 years ago, when I had just moved from East to West Germany. Initially, I could not erect a straight line of fencing no matter how hard I tried. Once you get used to them and have handled nettings often enough, it will go smoothly and just as fast as using poly wire fencing. This is especially true when you use electric nettings with double-spiked posts and string verticals. Nettings with single-spiked posts and/or with rigid verticals are indeed far more cumbersome to use.

The “pushback” I often receive when I describe my system of grazing cells are questions or statements like these: “What about back-grazing?” or “You don’t prevent back-grazing that way!” Let’s discuss first what is meant by back-grazing: when sheep enter a grazing cell, they graze what is in front of them. When they enter a new grazing cell and are allowed to re-enter the grazing cell(s) they had just grazed, and graze there again, it is called back-grazing. Taking this so-called “second bite” (or third or fourth) of a plant is not good for any plant and weakens it and delays its regrowth, more so than the first bite did. So you want to greatly minimize back-grazing. Many avoid this back-grazing by putting up fencing so the sheep cannot go back to what they have grazed. The downside to this is that water and shade (if it is portable) have to also be moved when the sheep are moved. Or worse, shade is no longer offered, even when appropriate, because natural shade is not available in the new grazing cell while it may have been in the old one, now off-limits by the backstop fencing to avoid back-grazing. That would be unacceptable to me. So how do I avoid back-grazing? I make sure that the new cell that is being grazed remains more desirable than the old one(s) that has/have been grazed the day or days before. What if I err and by evening (my pasture shifts are mostly in the morning) the sheep desire to graze some of the old and grazed pasture? Very simple. That evening I open the next grazing cell that I had planned on grazing the next day. Do I eliminate back-grazing that way? Not entirely, but I reduce it to a neglectful amount. The advantages I have with this system (being able to do a daily pasture

shift, being able to access shade at all times, leaving water and minerals in the same place for several days, and not having to put up entirely new grazing cells each day) FAR outweigh the little back-grazing I may have with my system.

Here is another argument I use to explain why my system is better even though it may allow some back-grazing: most of those who seek my advice and wish to avoid back-grazing at any cost also tell me they are not able to do a daily pasture shift because the daily shift is too much work. It requires the aforementioned setting up brand-new grazing cells, moving of water troughs, shade, and so forth. Instead, they graze a cell a second and third and fourth and fifth day, possibly even longer. How many second bites (and third and fourth and fifth...) do you think their sheep are allowed to get of certain plants? Keep in mind, when sheep graze a pasture cell for several days in a row, they don’t graze one patch of that cell one day and another patch the next and another the day after. Instead, sheep, which can graze very selectively, will mostly continue to graze the same good plants they sought out on day one and will graze them a little shorter, day after day. Other areas will be only lightly grazed if they contain species that are less desirable. A daily rotation has shown that sheep graze less selectively and more evenly. Their competitiveness when grazing next to each other aids less selective grazing as well.

Another reason why I find my system of setting grazing cells desirable is its simplicity. Rasing sheep for several decades, I have found that any system is only sustainable year after year when it is simple. If it gets very cumbersome and lots of effort has to be made to keep it going, the chances are that you will either be less thorough, or you will let it go altogether. So for the sake of sustainability, I like simplicity. Yes, I am indeed that kind of a simple man. 🐑

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