

Things That Changed

“Panta Rei”
-Heraclitus

—Ulf Kintzel

I run into it often that, when asked for advice, somebody cites what I wrote many years ago. At times, I realize that this is a practice I no longer apply. “Panta Rei” — “Everything flows” was a phrase a Greek philosopher coined, meaning that everything is changing. In fact, the only constant is change. White Clover Sheep Farm is changing and I am no exception. At times, my views have evolved since then. New information or new experiences led to that change. It is not a matter of inconsistency. It is that I have learned since then. In some cases, my farm is not the same anymore and I had to adjust. In this article, I want to address some of the issues where my outlook has evolved or changed.

Legumes. Over the course of the years I have tried several different kinds of legumes. When we came to this farm eleven years ago, the farm consisted in great part of hay fields that had been harvested for many, many years without any application of fertilizer for who knows how long. The stands of grass were thin. I learned about frost-seeding. Red clover had been grown in this area for many years, so much so that wherever soil was disturbed while building our new home, it started growing like a weed. There was such an enormous seedbank. I used to joke if red clover were a noxious weed, I’d soon be out of business. It also happened that my neighbor was growing red clover for seed. I figured that probably nothing will grow better here than something local. Besides, the price was right. Red clover seed from seed companies was

much higher priced. I gave it a try and frost-seeded my first ten acres with red clover in early spring of 2008. I chose a field with the thinnest stand of grass. By mid-August of that year I had a stand of red clover that was unbelievably thick and tall. Because it was so unbelievable, I used a picture of it for this article. If I were to just describe it, you might not believe me. Our kids, quite young back then, stood waist high in that clover. Over the next few years, I continued frost-seeding red clover, mostly with good success. Then my luck changed. The seed would not make a good stand for a few subsequent years. What happened? Initially, there were many bare spots in between plants in these run-down hay fields, so the seed could make good soil contact. I didn’t spend any money on fertilizer. Why not? First of all, I didn’t have any. Buying this farm, building a house and a barn, and moving here had exhausted our financial means. Besides, in some regards I am a patient man. I don’t expect change to come overnight. I figured if I keep grazing these fields in a rotational system and feed purchased hay outside in the fields during the winter, change will come. My patience was tested because I didn’t see much change at first. And then it came all at once. In year six and seven, the level of production went through the proverbial roof. The stands of pasture thickened and it looked “fatter.” (The latter would be a direct translation from the German term “fette Weide”). It also meant that my red clover had less and less of a chance to make soil contact. So much so that



the two bags of red clover seed intended for frost-seeding in the spring of 2017 are still lying in my basement. There is more to this story. At some point in the early years at this farm, I started frost-seeding white clover as well. I first balked at the idea, looking at the price tag of white clover seed until it was pointed out to me that there is almost three times as much seed in a pound of



*My first time frost-seeding red clover. Can you believe it?
The Kintzgel children: Johann, Sarah, and Lech.*

white clover compared to a pound of red clover. Now it made economic sense frost-seeding white clover. I could establish a good stand of white clover with just two to three pounds of seed per acre. The upside of white clover is that, once you have a stand of it, it is here to stay if managed properly. It is a perennial and it reseeds itself easily, especially when properly rotationally grazed. Red clover on the other hand is a biennial, but you only have a really good stand the first year after it was seeded. So, was I wrong in promoting red clover? Absolutely not. Today I still highly, highly, highly recommend seeding it to every new farmer who tells me that their pasture is lacking, that they don't have much money to spend since they just started, and that they need improvement fast. Very often, I am asked if they should lime or fertilize or what to do. My standard answer is two-fold: frost-seed red clover and then feed purchased hay outside in ever-changing places during the winter. Red clover beefs up your pasture the same year it was seeded (white clover takes two years before you have a good stand), you build organic matter, and you have lots to graze. The hay you have to purchase anyway and a very high percentage of its nutrients will stay in the pasture after being consumed by the sheep. In addition, red clover still grows well if your soil pH is rather low; white clover does not.

I also tried bird's-foot trefoil in various places. I liked the idea of it being none-bloating to sheep. I had to re-seed a pumpkin field and an abandoned rented field that hadn't been in production for years with nothing to show but weeds. Each field is about 13 acres. One of the legumes I chose for these two fields was bird's-foot trefoil. It grew well at first in both fields. I was pleased. One field was grazed; the other was used primarily for hay and only grazed early spring and late

fall. In the field that I grazed, the bird's-foot trefoil started disappearing. Now, years later, there is next to no bird's-foot trefoil and hasn't been for a few years. During a pasture walk some years ago, a sheep farmer who had experimented with it said, "I can't keep it around." The phrase stuck with me. So much so that I am using it myself these days. I haven't looked at prices

for seed lately but I remember it going up in price a lot, which also made it prohibitive. The field that gets hayed is a better story. The bird's-foot trefoil stayed and expanded by re-seeding itself. When it blooms, these 13 acres are as yellow as a field of sunflowers. (Note: slight exaggeration by the writer for effect).

Just to make the outline complete, I should also mention that I dabbled a little in Kura Clover. But I won't waste much ink on it. I ended up having few plants around the barn, so I know how it looks but that's all the wisdom I gained from a rather expensive bag of seed. Sometimes you have to try something in life to find out that this is not what you want. On a long list of mine that says: "I will not do this ever again," you will find Kura Clover under K.

So, what I am left with as a legume is my white clover. Whether it is the variety Alice, Huia, Ladino, Kopu 2 (my favorite), or a New Zealand white clover that says VNS (variety not stated)—all work great. This kind of works out well for me because the name of our farm carries this legume's name.

Pasture rotation. In a past article, I mentioned that my goal is trying to get as close as possible to a one or two-day rotation while my rotation was often between three and five days long. At the time, I was exclusively using electric nettings for my rotational grazing. While I consider them fairly safe and much prefer them over any other electrical fence, it is also very time consuming and didn't really allow for a daily rotation. That was then. This is now: I have since invested in a woven wire perimeter fence. The entire farm is fenced that way. I also have one large paddock fenced that way that I call my vacation pasture and another smaller paddock for my rams. Above the woven wire is one strand of wire, which is



White clover, my favorite legume.

electrified with a six-Joule plug-in unit in the barn. This energizer replaced my many portable and battery-powered energizer units. In addition, a remote control allows me to turn my energizer off and on anywhere on the farm. My interior fencing remains electric nettings, which I can electrify by connecting them with a Powerlink to the strand of wire on top of the woven wire. I gained a tremendous amount of safety and security with this woven wire fence. Coyotes and straying dogs are rarely a concern. What I also gained was time, so much so that I started making grazing cells smaller and smaller until I ended up with a daily rotation. While there are a few exceptions to my daily rotation, it is now pretty much the rule. I noticed a few benefits of it. First, the grazing is more even, more uniform. Secondly, the manure distribution is more uniform. And last but not least, intake seems to have increased. In most cases, I rotate in the morning to avoid having the sheep bed on fresh pasture as they would if I were to rotate in the afternoon or evening. What are exceptions to my daily rotation schedule? During breeding season I have three and sometimes four groups of sheep and goats. They don't all get rotated once a day but may stay a few days in the same pasture. My rams have a paddock which I subdivide at times, but for practical reasons I don't rotate a few rams and bucks and some ram lambs that are for sale on a daily basis.

What I still don't do is a twice-a-day rotation. I don't see myself attempting it. Since I am not milking cows, I still don't see the benefits or the practicality of it.

Pasture rest periods. In a recent interview by Grass Fed Life <http://www.permaculturevoices.com/grass-fed-life/>, to be found on the Internet <http://www.permaculturevoices.com/30-years-of-truly-pastured-raised-lambs-with-ulf-kintzel-of-white-clover-sheep-farm-gfl55x/>, I was asked how long my rest periods are. Scrambling for a quick answer since I had not known any questions before the interview, I stated a number of days in the high 40s to low 50s. I'd like to have my

words back. I used to have a pasture rotation that went that long and in some cases even well beyond 50 days in the summer. Back then I was establishing pasture here at the farm and for that sake it was a good thing. However, I also truly thought more days of rest is always better. Then I noticed a decrease in quality when the rotation went beyond 50 days and therefore intake dropped and lots of old grass was left standing. I hear the argument often that nothing is wasted and anything left in the pasture goes back to building organic matter. While that may be true, it would have been a greater benefit to my farm, my soils, and my bottom line had it gone in part through my sheep first instead of all being left as residual. About five years ago, I contacted Jim Gerrish with some questions about it and he, always the man with empirical evidence in his many tables, diagrams, and charts, confirmed that the quality of pasture does go down when the rest exceeds roughly six weeks. In recent years, my summer rotation has been more in the five to six-week period, or 35 to 42 days. In the spring, it is notably shorter since grass will grow ahead and become unpalatable if I don't rotate on a three-week schedule. Summer slows the rotation down, as it should. In late summer and early fall some pasture will see an even longer rotation for the sake of stock-piling.

What else did I learn over the past ten plus years? I learned that it is perfectly all right to occasionally break a rule of grass-farming or cut a corner. If you otherwise abide by the basic rules of it, you will find that pasture is unbelievably forgiving and will bounce back. The rules of grass-farming are no dogma. 🐾

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