

Pasture Management on Organic Dairy Farms: Keys to Grazing Success – eOrganic article <http://www.extension.org/pages/18624/organic-dairy-production-system-topics>

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Introduction

An organic dairy farm with a well-designed and properly managed grazing system has many advantages. These include higher feed quality, lower feed costs, improved animal health, excellent animal welfare, and the ability to meet consumer expectations. [During the twelve-month dairy herd transition, while feeding organic grain but selling nonorganic milk](#), having an already established and successful grazing system can reduce costs significantly.

A well-managed grazing system provides low cost, good quality, high protein feed. This is particularly helpful for organic and transitioning dairy farmers, for whom grain costs are high and increasing. When feeding well-managed pasture, organic dairy farmers can switch to supplementing with energy feeds such as corn, barley, or molasses. Other cost savings can come from having the cows harvest their own feed and spread their own manure as they graze.

Good grazing management can accomplish the following:

- lower feed costs,
- improve livestock health and lower vet bills,
- reduce cull rates, and
- produce longer-lived animals & make it possible to have additional income from sale of heifers & cows.

Over time, a well-managed pasture will improve in both quality and yield. Good management can convert weedy or brushy pastures where animals have to search to find good quality forage into highly productive pastures that can feed more animals high quality forage, produced and harvested at lower cost. This will also reduce the need to renovate and reseed pastures by encouraging the growth of more productive and palatable perennial pasture plants.

Livestock whose diet is mostly or all pasture produce meat and milk (or more specifically the fats in the meat and milk) that may contain different amounts and types of nutrients than grain-fed livestock. These nutrients can include beta-carotene, vitamins A, E and D, omega-3 fatty acids, and conjugated linoleic acid (CLA). In addition to potential nutritional differences, many consumers are also attracted to some of the other benefits of grass farming including improved animal welfare and environmental sustainability.

Grazing Guidelines

The following can be used as guidelines for good grazing management.

- Learn how overgrazing occurs and then manage to avoid it.
- Walk through each pasture each week and record the height.
- Keep records of when each pasture is grazed.
- Do not let animals return to a paddock until it has fully regrown (recovery periods will be variable).
- Do not let animals stay in one area for more than three days; 12–24 hours is better.
- Move animals frequently. Moving animals more often can increase dry matter intake and more rapidly improve pasture quality.

- Do not follow a set rotation. Graze according to plant growth rates. If one pasture grows faster than the others do, graze it more often. If there are pastures that grow slowly, graze other areas and let the plants grow back.
- Lock animals in each paddock so they cannot wander back to the barn.
- When strip grazing, use a back fence to prevent “back grazing,” so animals do not overgraze their favorite plants.
- Monitor body condition score, milk urea nitrogen levels, and watch manure consistency to see if cows are being overfed protein or not getting enough dry matter intake.

Guidelines for Youngstock

The same grazing principals apply to grazing youngstock but there are some special considerations to keep in mind, as follows.

- Training heifers and calves to electric fence early on can make them much easier to manage. A training area in a barnyard with the electric fence inside the barnyard fence works well. It is essential that the fence carry a high voltage when training young animals. Low volts on the fence will result in poorly trained animals that are more likely to run through fences or even injure themselves.
- Youngstock are more susceptible to parasites than adults, so youngstock pastures should be managed to minimize infection.
- An additional wire or changing the height of the wire to keep the calves from ducking under a single strand fence.

References and Citations

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