

# Grazing Basics for Dairy Herds

COOPERATIVE  
EXTENSION  
SERVICE



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With recent advances in fencing and watering systems, improvements in forage species, increasing costs of forage harvesting equipment, and tightening profit margins, incorporating a grazing component into the overall forage program has regained interests among dairy producers. Some key points when establishing a grazing program include:

- Grazed forages can comprise a small part (as little as 5 lbs of dry matter or 20 % forage) or the majority of the forages consumed by the cow.
- Strip grazing allows cattle to more efficiently utilize available forage. For years, this concept has been used when grazing small grains in the spring. However, this method works well when grazing any forage species.
- A forage program needs to be implemented which allows for sufficient, high quality forages to be available for grazing throughout the grazing season. For example, from mid-June through August, cool season grasses, such as orchardgrass and fescue do not readily grow back. Grazing alfalfa or sudangrass or feeding stored forages can help fill this void.
- Forages need to be grazed when they are young and vegetative. As the plant matures from the vegetative to reproductive (heading out or flower) stage of maturity, cattle eat less of the plants and they get less nutrients out of what they do eat. For cool season grasses such as orchard grass, grazing usually starts when they are 6-8 inches in height and they are grazed down till they are 3 to 4 inches in height. Alfalfa is usually 10-15 inches in height when starting to graze.
- When cows graze, it is important that they can “get a full mouth” of grazed forage in every bite. Cattle spend a maximum of 8 to 9 hours daily grazing. If they do not get a “full bite” of forage, they will eat less and production could suffer.
- Water and shade should be provided in each paddock cows graze.