

# DESIGNING A GRAZING SYSTEM FOR ALFALFA

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As we think about grazing alfalfa, we should decide why we are considering alfalfa and where it fits. I want to address some of these issues from my prospective as a grazer with several years experience and as an agriculture employee working with many grazers over the years. Alfalfa is the most productive, high quality grazing forage we can grow in Kentucky; we need to be using it more.

Should we plant our whole farm to alfalfa? No. Alfalfa can be a part of a successful grazing program, but there are right places for this plant and places where it doesn't fit. We need to be planting alfalfa on our deep well-drained soils with high yield potential. Alfalfa generally doesn't do very well on wet soils and will not be very productive on thin, poor sites.

I believe alfalfa has four "special" places to really add to our grazing systems. One is to provide high quality forages in the summer, when our traditional forages experience summer slump. The second fit is to use this crop for creep grazing of calves. Research shows you can add from 30 to 60 pounds to calf weaning weight just by creep grazing. The third time that alfalfa can help is during November. We normally need forage while we are stockpiling fescue. Alfalfa can add a lot of forage during this time of the year, helping us to avoid feeding hay. The final place I think you can really benefit from alfalfa is when you have high value, productive, growing animals. Alfalfa can put big gains on stocker cattle and replacement heifers at a very low cost.

The rest of my presentation will be dealing with how to design systems to reach the benefits. I am going to try and relate some experiences on our farm and experiences I have seen others have. This will be a brief overview, for more information consider a grazing school.

We started a rotational grazing program over 14 years ago out of necessity. We were out of grass and needed more feed. I just started dividing alfalfa fields and began to see the how much feed we could harvest with our cows instead of in a hay baler.

To solve the summer slump problem, I think you will need about 25 to 30 per cent of you pasture in alfalfa. This should give you enough forage to last from mid June to mid September. Remember this should be planted on good soil. Soil that has the ability to supply water during the summer. These same fields will give you the forage you need to creep graze. By letting your calf's forward graze or by giving them access to a special alfalfa pasture you can reap big rewards.

In general, laying out a system for alfalfa is very much like laying out any other controlled grazing plan.

- First, if nothing else, divide your pastures up so you have 6 to 8 pastures. If they are similar in productive potential it will be easier to manage. Notice I didn't say the same size in acres, but similar in growth potential. I would make pastures with good soils smaller and pastures with less productive soils bigger. Also consider that south facing slopes are dryer earlier in the summer; also wet soils might all be together in one field. Try to keep like soils and forages together. Don't try to graze a fescue field and an alfalfa field at the same time in the same pasture.
- Try to have water in each pasture, but at least within 800 feet from water to the farthest point in each field.
- Use a combination of permanent and temporary fences. I suggest you put up one wire fence for the first year or two. Then begin to decide where your lanes and more permanent fences need to be. We moved fences for several years before settling on our present set up.
- You must have a good fence charger to sleep sound at night.
- Use your current resources, it isn't necessary to spend lots of money up front. Learn as you go!
- You may want to add alfalfa a little at a time. Sowing all you need at one time means you will have to replace it all at one time. Seeding over a two or three year period will allow you to have good stands all the time.
- Keep a fescue field close by, to use when fields are very wet. This will help prevent crown damage and extend the life of your stand.

Alfalfa has a lot to offer Kentucky cattlemen, high yields and high quality means more profit potential for years to come.