

Building Good Pasture Starts With Good Maintenance

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BUSKIRK, N.Y. — A twilight pasture walk at Longlesson Farm Angus on July 18 illustrated the challenge of getting farmers out to talk to each other this season, especially since the wet weather has so many behind on work on their own farms.

Only a handful of people showed up, and those who didn't likely stayed away to take advantage of the clear weather to get caught up on hay baling and other chores.

But as the saying goes: "the show must go on."

Bob and Melanie Mason, who run Longlesson Farm and North Country Daylilies, hosted the pasture walk, which was organized by Cornell Cooperative Extension.

The Masons have been building

their operations since 1986, when they bought the first 75 acres of their current 450 acres. They lease an additional 100 acres and keep 120 registered Black Angus on these lands. The grass-fed beef is sold at farmers markets as well as three restaurants in the Saratoga region.

Mark Bessire, Cornell Cooperative Extension educator from Columbia and Greene counties, spoke about pasture renovation, with a focus on soil health and weed control.

"It's constant warfare trying to keep what you're growing thriving," Bessire said. "The corn people think grasses are evil. They go out there, spray it, dig it up, just like we try to get rid of smooth bedstraw."

Smooth bedstraw can seed as much as three times a year. Bessire said the key to controlling it is keeping the plant from going to seed and making deposits in the

seedbank. Whether you try to get rid of it through chemicals or cultural practices, Bessire said minimizing seed production in a field is important. As the seeds survive two years in the soil and are believed to pass through a cow's rumen, restoring a pasture that's overcome with smooth bedstraw is a commitment.

Bessire said producers should mow frequently the first year before the bedstraw goes to seed. One option is to plant an annual grass in the fall before applying a weed killer the following spring. But he said such application will prevent clover from growing too, so you have to consider whether you can go without grazing in this area.

Clover is a very useful plant for both the soil and the grazing herd. One method of planting clover is broadcast seeding it and using the cows to tramp in the seed.

"Cows will eat clover first," Bessire said.

A compound in bedstraw, anthraquinone, keeps cows from eating it. Amounts of anthraquinone can vary depending on soil type and other conditions. But Bessire said the cumulative effect of exposure to cows can be toxic. Still, some producers employ cows in the fight against bedstraw, training the animals to choose it instead of something else.

Along with getting the seedbank under control, Bessire recommends getting pH above 6.5.

"Below 6, bedstraw will outrun anything, 6.2 is where grass proliferates, and 6.5 is where grass and clover thrive. The land isn't sweet enough to grow the best grass until the pH is 6.7, though," Bessire said, steering the discussion to balanced soils and nutrient density in plants.

Balanced soils will yield more

nutrients in pasture grasses. Cattle finish quicker, and with less grain, if the grasses they graze or forage are higher in nutrients.

Bessire passed out sheets detailing nutrient levels in balanced soils and on using Brix readings of plant juices to help understand good soil and balanced feed. The handouts also explained the basics of Brix and how to measure it using a garlic press and refractometer.

Bessire demonstrated the process using a weed. Taking a few leaves, he crushed them between his hands for one full minute, pushing it onto a garlic press. Holding the press over a piece of glass on the end of the refractometer, he squeezed out a few drops of plant juice. When held up to the light, people could see that the sugars read higher than the scale, which only went up to 10.

Bessire explained how adding nutrients to soils can influence Brix and can help eliminate or minimize need for grain in grass-fed animals. The best sources of these nutrients can be pricey.

"We're pedaling as fast as we can just to feed what we have," said producer Bob Mason. "I can't see putting aside a percentage of my land to manage it."

The process is an investment, time wise, and for inputs. You need to consider if you can take a field that gives you 50 bales of hay out of production for two years.

"Pay me now or pay me later," was the equation Bessire used as people considered the cost of minerals needed to build soil quality.

The evening ended with a walk in one of the Masons' pastures, where people identified grasses and weeds, and tested the Brix on various grasses.

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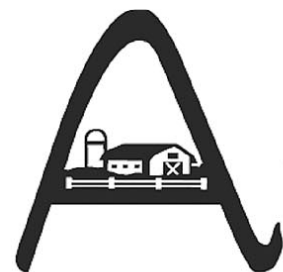
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