IMPROVING BLUEGRASS PASTURES

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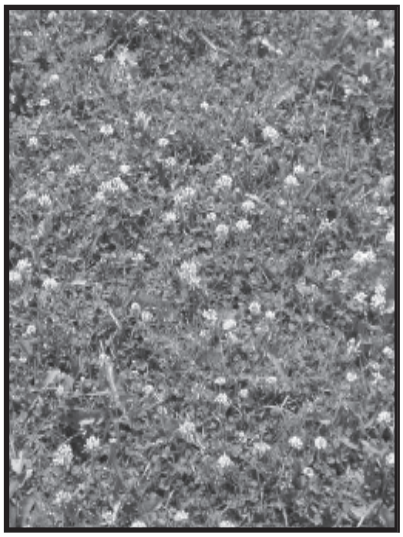
Many Midwest pastures are made up Kentucky bluegrass/white clover combinations. Kentucky bluegrass is one of our lowest producing pasture species in parts of the Midwest with warm, dry summers. In northern regions where temperatures are generally cooler it can be a productive species. A common question is how best to approach improving these pastures. Tearing up and re-seeding is tempting but may not always be the best option. Older, well established pastures are often the most productive and dependable. Below are some suggestions for improving productivity of bluegrass pastures.

Change from a continuous to a rotational grazing system. Simply dividing pastures into smaller units and moving animals from pasture to pasture can result in dramatic improvements in yield. The rest periods this rotation provides results in healthier, more productive grasses. Bluegrass is quite tolerant of close grazing and so predominates in continuously stocked, closely grazed pastures. Dividing pastures and not grazing as closely may well result in a shift to different grass species, eliminating the need for re-seeding.



Bluegrass/White Clover Pasture

A second method for improving productivity of bluegrass pastures is nitrogen fertilization. Bluegrass, as well as other grass pastures can benefit from up to 150 units of nitrogen per acre. If this is applied as a single application, much of the nitrogen will be lost to the atmosphere or leach out of the root zone. Dividing the nitrogen into three separate 50 unit applications insures better utilization and greater pasture productivity. Begin by applying 50 units in early May. Apply an additional 50 units in mid-June and another 50 units in early August. The early May application may not be needed as pasture growth may already be greater than utilization. Soil test and apply required potassium and phosphorus. These can be applied at any time but for optimum utilization this year, should be applied in spring.

If the above techniques don't provide adequate improvements then new species should be planted. Frost seeding or inter-seeding new species into the existing pasture will likely fail in the tight sod that bluegrass produces. These sods need to be either killed chemically and seeded with a no-till drill or plowed and planted conventionally. Recommended species mixtures for sheep pasture are similar as for other animal species. Some common mixtures are listed below:

Orchardgrass/red clover – this is a productive mixture which recovers quickly from grazing. Orchardgrass matures early and may be hard to adequately graze early in the season.

Bromegrass/timothy + alfalfa or red clover– This mixture can provide long lasting pasture if managed properly. Recovery is slower and they can be easily overgrazed so management is important.

Perennial ryegrass/white clover – this mixture is tolerant of close, frequent grazing but ryegrass is subject to winterkill.

Tall fescue/red clover – this is another productive mixture. Use endophyte-free fescue varieties.

Reed Canarygrass/red clover or alfalfa – Reed canary grass is our most drought tolerant grass. It recovers quickly from grazing. It grows quickly and requires careful management to maintain quality.

These species are best planted with a companion crop in late April to early May. Late summer, from early August in northern areas to September 1 in the south can also be effective.