

Teaching Cows to Graze Weeds

By: Teri McClellan

In September, I had the opportunity to go to the Colorado Weed Network meeting at the Denver Botanic Gardens. One of the speakers there was a lady by the name of Kathy Voth. Kathy's talk was on "Weed Eating Cows". Kathy has taught cows to eat diffuse knapweed, Canada thistle, leafy spurge, and even Dalmatian toadflax.

Kathy Voth began her land management career with 12 years at the Bureau of Land Management. In the past, Kathy did a pilot project on "Goats! For Fire Safe Homes in Wildland Areas." Here she focused on how to use goats to reduce fire danger. Most recently, she has focused on "Turning Cows into Weed Managers".

Well, I'm sure you've all heard "Goats will eat anything" or "Cows won't eat that". Research shows that all animals learn what to eat. Knowing this, Kathy works with young cows. The young are more likely to try new things. The key to this is to keep the learning phase positive. First impressions count.

There are seven steps to the teaching process. There is a bit of labor involved so you need several people to help you collect the weeds and prep them for the cows, but this process only lasts about 2 weeks. You need help from people who know their weeds, but kids can be very helpful in the actual collection process. After this point the rancher can start turning the cows out into small grazing areas with the target weeds in them. As the cows work that area and get better at their new job, they can then be turned out onto bigger and bigger areas. Kathy found the cows even started eating weeds that she hadn't introduced them to.

Then the question is "Well, don't the cows just spread the seed through the manure?" And the answer to that is yes. But if they are now eating the weeds and are teaching their calves to eat the weeds, the constant harassment of the weeds actually seems to help control them and actually decreases the weed population.

Another question is about the nutritional value of the weeds. The studies show the weeds have the same nutritional value as alfalfa; the difference is in the toxins. Keep in mind toxins are different than toxic. You can avoid problems by knowing the chemicals in the target plants. The field studies and pilot projects Kathy has done show that her cows do fine as long as the field they are grazing has other plants to graze as well. The cows seem to get a good balance. Her herds gain normal or above normal weight. There is also the question of mouth sores from the thistle; her cows have not shown any problem with this.

So then there is the question, do I have to teach every cow and go through this every year? The answer is NO. The cows learn from each other. The young cows will continue to compete for the weeds as they grow and when they have calves, the young will learn from their mothers to eat the weeds and you are off and running.

The cost was minimal compared to the fact that in 2000 about 5 billion dollars was spent on Range and Pasture Weed Control.

Now this is a quick overview of what she went over that day. If you are at all interested by this little article, you can contact Kathy for more complete information.

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