



## When to Start Grazing?

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One of the questions that I get almost every year is, when can I turn my cattle out on pasture?

Why? Because as soon as those first green blades start to appear, both you and your cattle get impatient.

Grass is one of the most important things you produce and over the years more and more livestock producers are starting to realize this and pay more attention to their forages and how they manage them.

How you manage your early spring grazing can make a considerable difference to your total production over the growing season. Grazing a pasture too early will result in the vegetation being removed before the plants have had a chance to replenish root reserves. The result is poor pasture performance for at least the remainder of the growing season and usually longer. **A rule of thumb is grazing one week too early in the spring will sacrifice three weeks of grazing in the fall.**

To understand the importance of waiting until there is considerable growth on your pastures before you turn your cattle out, you need to understand the grass and legume plant. In the fall, the plants stop growing and go dormant. During the winter they draw on these nutrients stored in the roots and stem base. Remember they are dormant which means they are still living. In the spring, the plant draws on these reserves to start growth. This draw down continues until the 3 leaf stage when there is enough leaf material for the plant to start manufacturing energy to continue growth. Plants that are over-grazed in the fall tend to go into winter with lower root reserves leaving less stored nutrients for the plant to draw on in the spring. Plants that are grazed too early in the spring continue to draw on stored reserves which lower plant health and productivity, and could lead to eventual death of the plant.

In the spring, the first grazing on tame pasture should begin when there is 15 cm (6") growth. At this stage of development, the field will be approaching 454 kg(1,000 lb)/acre on pastures with a dense plant stand. If there is a high proportion of legumes, especially alfalfa, an increased height should be used - 20-30 cm (8-12") growth.

With the relatively normal winter we just went through, feed supplies on most farms is adequate. By turning cattle out on this early new growth, you may find that it doesn't contain enough dry matter to meet the nutrient requirements of the cow and calf. Remember that a lactating cow requires about 2.5% of her body weight to meet these

requirements. Your animals may need to consume 150 lbs/day of early grass to ingest 30 lbs of dry matter. With early pastures being short, a cow won't be able to grab enough grass in a day to meet the needs of her and her calf resulting in lost body condition.

If it is necessary to remove beef cattle and calves from wet winter quarters in the spring, providing free access to the summer pasture is not a good idea. It is much better to provide a spring pasture, saved specifically for early spring use and rested after use. This pasture will need to be rested likely for the remainder of the grazing season if it is to recover.

Continue to provide preserved feed until other pastures are ready for grazing. Beginning the grazing season correctly will facilitate higher stocking rates later on, better plant and animal performance and a longer grazing season. The more patient you are, the more productive your pasture will be.

For more information in grazing, go to Grazing Tame Pastures Effectively:  
[http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex113](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex113).