

Grazing Alfalfa: Friend or Foe?

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Alfalfa grazing is a practice many welcome, but others shy from due to fear of animal bloat. There are advantages and challenges to using alfalfa for grazing, but benefits offset challenges.

Those valuing the practice understand the benefits and adhere to grazing management practices to minimize bloat risk. Alfalfa's high yield and highly digestible nutrients contribute to exceptional daily gains, extend pasture utilization in summer months when many cool-season grasses go dormant, and add substantial nitrogen to the soil. Farmer experience and research have shown excellent gains per animal and per acre without shortening alfalfa stand life.

Another alfalfa grazing advantage comes in extending stand life. When the stand nears the end of its useful life due to diminishing stems/ft², it can be overseeded with grasses and grazed the following year, extending stand life a few more years.

What is Alfalfa Bloat? Frothy bloat, as it is known, is a forage-related disorder of cattle grazing highly digestible forage and legumes (e.g., alfalfa). The high concentration of digestible proteins in alfalfa upon reaching the rumen result in rapid fermentation and production of excessive foam that cannot be expelled by eructation or belching, resulting in animal ballooning and, if not treated, death. Bloat occurrence in alfalfa is real and a major limitation in grazing systems.

What are Some Alfalfa Bloat Prevention Strategies? While bloat is a valid concern in grazing alfalfa, there are strategies to minimize the risk of bloat, including:

- **Use alfalfa-grass mixtures.** Most farmers often use 30-40% alfalfa in a mixture with grasses and other legumes. Grass species that work well with alfalfa include smooth bromegrass and orchardgrass, which provide soil surface insulation in late winter and early spring, reducing alfalfa loss from heaving. If alfalfa winterkills, grasses will still provide herbage.
- **Use alfalfa varieties with low bloat potential.** In addition to grazing-tolerant alfalfas, consider purchasing low-bloat potential alfalfa varieties.
- **Graze at 30-40% alfalfa flowering.** As plants mature, they develop more stems than leaves, providing more fiber. At 30-40% flowering, bloat risk greatly decreases, as pointed out by University of Saskatchewan research scientists. When using 50/50 blends of alfalfa and grasses, reported gains can be 1.5-2 lbs/day.
- **Graze grass-only first or feed grass hay prior to grazing high-bloating potential pastures.** A safe practice is to feed hay or rotate livestock through a grass-only paddock before going into an alfalfa/grass mix. This guarantees rumen fill prior to alfalfa grazing. This is recommended during the first few weeks of grazing alfalfa.
- **Rotate paddocks at mid-day, when conditions are drier than early morning.**
- **Check with your veterinarian about feeding bloat-preventing compounds.**
- **Do not graze when:** plants are wet from dew; alfalfa or alfalfa/grass blends are immature; cattle are hungry; following a killing frost (<27°F) and for the following three days.
- **Look for bloat signs (swelling on the left side) during cool, cloudy/rainy weather.**
- **Keep a close watch when turning out animals for grazing for the first time.**



Cattle grazing paddock with good blend of flowered alfalfa/grass/clovers.