

CAN WEEDS SAVE THE GRAZIERS OF AMERICAN PRAIRIES?

If you drove across Kansas as I did this week you might be shocked at what you will see out your truck window. The magnificent Flint Hills prairies, land beloved to me and stretching for a hundred miles in any direction, is no longer just an over-grazed, abused and rutted land dotted with cow-calf pairs, it's blooming with flowers. LEAFY SPURGE, to be exact, growing, in certain areas, almost solid and as far as the eye can see. I'm sure city tourists are oohing and aahing over the "pretty flowers" but to me it wasn't pretty at all, it made me first mad, and then sad. Growing up and getting all my formal education in Kansas I've watched our prairies, especially these beautiful hills, going down the toilet.

When I relayed trip pictures and stories to Allan Nation, he chided me and said, "cheer up, boy....Kathy Voth continues to teach livestock how to eat nasty invasive weeds like spurge and they are gaining up to four pounds a day on it!" Four pounds a day? Well, I love that, maybe those flowers aren't so bad after all! Let's dig a little deeper.

GOT MILK(WEED)?

If you get JERRY BRUNETTI's Agri-Dynamic catalog (www.agri-dynamics.com) you will find a few free things, the one most pertinent to this conversation is a listing of the nutritional analysis of 24 "weeds", showing how they stack up with the gold standard, good ol' alfalfa. Here we find stinging nettle loaded with protein, plus it's over 4% calcium. Have you ever seen 4% calcium alfalfa? I didn't think so. Nettles, like the other ugly weed burdock both have close to 1% pure sulfur as well. The latter being the major mineral required to make most of the essential amino acids that characterize quality protein. So, yes, weeds are good, weeds are amazing and we all need to start learning how to respect them and then, how to graze them for maximum healthy stocking density and maximum weight gains on pasture.

Goat and sheep people really need to pay attention here. I'm not sure how we all got amnesia to this critical attribute of the small ruminant diet, but these creatures really do need to BROWSE. Browsing defined means chewing on growing things taller than the shoulder, that is, trees, shrubs, and good old weeds. In a nutshell, it's the perennial plants, e.g. weeds, that quite frequently send a taproot down to the nether world bringing up valuable minerals from the subsoil, minerals that are no longer adequate in farmed-out topsoil, minerals not accessible by the short-rooted annual plants.

Jerry calls all this "Health From the Hedgerow" and he gives talks about how to restore a hedgerow as well as a hedgerow mentality to your farm, it's all part of creating a living, breathing and holistic farmscape, all part of what is commonly referred to as BIODIVERSITY. This being a hallmark of virtually all organic farming. To this end I've created a list of over 100 wild and perennial plants that I consider essential to full-fledged livestock farming on the North American continent. You can find these listings of trees, shrubs and weeds in the "livestock" portion of my website www.willwinter.com.

HELLO, FARMBOY, THIS IS GOD SPEAKING...

Sometimes we all need to have something smack us right in the face before we really “get it” and that is exactly what happened to Todd Churchill, owner of the Thousand Hills Cattle Company and me this summer. Todd, primarily a cattle buyer for THCC, has been involved in his family’s cattle operations since a youth but this year he really wanted to get started growing more 100% grass-fed cattle of his very own. He also has an irritating problem, several hundred acres of someone else’s GM soybeans are being grown right along his driveway to his farmhouse. Last year the lease came up on this row crop land and the opportunity to convert much of this land, the view he looks at every day from his front porch, to beautiful grass was too great to resist. So, new lease in hand, off he went building new fence, laying new water lines and planting a custom-designed pasture grass/legume mix.

Then something very interesting happened, something unplanned, which, of course, is always the spirit world having some fun with us, opps, I mean, teaching us something. The new cattle came, but they came too early, way before all this new land was ready for stocking. And here’s the fun part. Todd was forced to camp these cattle for a few weeks on a tiny scrap of land belonging to a neighbor who lived down by the creek. Here’s another problem that came winging his way. These new cattle, which were, unfortunately, bought sight-unseen (but from a reputable Angus breeder) were in awful condition. Perhaps from the effects of the several-year drought plaguing our area, perhaps from some other factor, we don’t know, but all 25 head came to Todd scraggly and rough-coated, wormy-looking, covered with flies and, to top it all off, they were spooky, jumpy as wild deer. The deep black coat of these alleged Angus calves was mostly reddish-brown even though they weren’t red Angus.

Great. And now more problems, the new holding “pasture” wasn’t a pasture at all, it was a narrow strip of flood plain not suited for man nor beast, it had not even been grazed for 12 or more years, and there was no real grass in sight, nothing but huge mounds of Buckthorn, small tree clumps of Box Elder and, along the lower ground rows and rows of small willows. So, the deal was, Todd would just have to face the music and throw a round bale in there every day or two, feeding them hay until their real home came available.

Six weeks went by and what do you think happened? First of all, the hay was hardly touched. The hungry cattle went right for the buckthorn, gobbling up that nasty, thorny mess until it was stripped clean. Then they ate the box elder trees down, followed by the willows. When they had stripped the leaves as high as they could reach they knocked the small trunks down like some elephants had been rampaging, and they finished off the small branches. By the time they were done the place looked like the Serengeti of Africa after the herds had stripped it clean. This over-grown and neglected land had also been bespeckled by milkweeds and the cattle had even chomped the tops off of them as well! These cattle, for whatever reason knew they needed “medicine” so they took care of the business of getting healthy.

Here's the magic part of the story. Every single animal had been transformed like poor little Cinderella into near royalty! All the reddish-rough old hair was gone and gleaming, tight black hair was everywhere. The flies were virtually gone, and the general condition had "slicked up" into the most beautiful cattle one could ever hope to find. Even more amazingly, their disposition had changed, mellowed if you will, such that we could walk amongst them with ease. On one very unreasonably hot Minnesota day, the cattle were actually glistening with pure sweat, a very good sign of good metabolism. This was a true and major make-over in a very short six week period. A miracle you might say.

THE MORAL OF THE STORY IS:

Don't fight Mother Nature. Work with her. Learn from her, and let nature guide your hand. Spraying, burning or chopping weeds is insane, it's neither real grazing nor is it curing the real underlying issues. Study how natural grazing patterns have evolved and try to mimic that action. Study how MiG graziers such as Chad Peterson in the Sand Hills of Nebraska have turned weeds not only into money but also beautiful soil where there was none. Explore Kathy Voth's amazing school of weed eating. Expand your weed vocabulary. Stop hating them and learn to see them as a strange and complicated gift from nature.

Here's a small bibliography of books that want to live on your bookshelf:

- "Grass, the Forgiveness of Nature"* by Charles Walters
- "Weeds: Control Without Poisons"* by Charles Walters
- "Weeds and What They Tell"* by Ehrenfried Pfeiffer
- "Weeds and Why They Grow"* by Jay McCaman
- "Common Weeds of the United States"* by the good ol' U.S.D.A.
- "Management-Intensive Grazing"* by Jim Gerrish
- "Grassfed to Finish"* by some guy named Allan Nation
- "Prairie Earth"* by William Least Heat Moon

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William G. Winter, DVM is a free-lance journalist, teacher and consultant. He is primarily interested in awakening the world to the human health benefits and the environmental bonus that comes from raising grass-fed livestock using sustainable practices and the magic of holistic herd health. He is also the herd health consultant for producers of livestock for Thousand Hills Cattle Company and lives in Minnesota where the grass grows green and lush, and all the producers children eat right and are therefore above average. Contact him with your concerns, grand concepts, and rave compliments at [holistic@visi.com](mailto:holistic@visi.com) or [www.willwinter.com](http://www.willwinter.com).