K-STATE Research and Extension | Meadowlark District

February 13, 2026

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Forage Feeding and Soil Fertility

Mid-February. The 'interface' of feeding hay from *last* season while in various stages of fertilizer applications for *this* season. Completely unrelated? Not as much as you might think. If you've ever pulled soil samples from hay ground and pasture adjacent to each other, it's not uncommon for nutrient levels to be higher in the pasture than in the hay ground – even when fertilizer application levels might be greater in the hay ground. The reason is most often tied to utilization. In hay fields, we apply nutrients and remove most of it in hay. In pastures, it's often recycled – at varying degrees depending on what animal is utilizing it – through the animal, resulting in more stable soil test levels in pastures while hay field levels decline.

Beyond nutrient cycling, another potential factor impacting soil test levels occurs when pastures also become winter feeding sites. USDA Ag Researcher Alan Franzluebbers wrote in a recent *Hay and Forage Grower* article the importance of understanding how often concentrated feeding areas can affect soil test results from the high soil test Phosphorous and Potassium levels in these zones. It often means altering testing protocols on these pastures to get accurate results.

Where do those nutrients come from? Often from that hay we fertilized in the last couple of months. A team of University of Missouri scientists attempted to quantify the fertility contribution of a fertilized cool season forage in a publication entitled *Calculating Fertilizer Value of Supplemental Feed For Cattle On Pasture*. They found that a ton of 12 and a half percent protein hay provides about 10 pounds of nitrogen, 12 pounds of phosphate, and 35 pounds of potassium. Depending on the amount of hay fed – and the distribution across the feeding site – it could be a substantial supplement to synthetic fertilizer also being applied.

What does that mean for pasture fertility? For starters, caution needs to be taken when soil sampling fields where winter feeding occurs, so results are an actual accurate representation of the field as a whole. Second, we may also have an opportunity to use managed feeding to utilize the fertilizer we're applying to a hay crop this year to help increase pasture fertility levels next year. It's not a simple task – or in some cases even possible - to adjust feeding sites this way, but it could be a consideration for shoring up sites suffering from poor fertility levels.

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Eat Your Cereal(s)

Although it is the shortest month of the year, February can feel like one of the longest, at least to the grazing animal. During the depths of winter, green growing forage can be in short supply. Annual cereals can help to fill this forage gap at this time of the year. While there are similarities between fall seeded cereal crops, there are differences as well, so today we will look at some pros and cons to each. Planting window is likely too late for fall-planted crops this year, but honestly, we aren't too late to consider spring planted cereal crops who have much the same benefits.

When grazed from early April to early May, forage quality of cereal rye, winter triticale, and winter wheat is similar. Under proper management, growing calves can gain 3 to 4 lbs./day on these high-quality crops. Cereal rye can have greater growth during cooler conditions compared to wheat or triticale. This is the reason it can often provide earlier spring grazing. On the other hand, triticale retains its feed value better into late spring since it does not mature as quickly. This makes it well-suited for hay and silage, or for grazing well into the start of summer. If planning on harvesting hay after heading, make sure to choose an awnless variety to increase palatability.

To optimize performance of grazing cattle with high nutritional requirements, such as growing calves or lactating cows, the key is to keep the grass from becoming overly mature. Lactating cows need to be on a steady or an increasing plane of nutrition as they move into breeding. Managing forage maturity is key to maintaining availability of high-quality forage. Small cereal forages grow fast and mature rapidly, so it is important to actively manage the grazing to ensure the plants are not allowed to become overly mature.

Target beginning grazing height is when the plants are about 5 to 6 inches tall and should be managed to keep the maximum height at 8 to 10 inches. Rotational grazing with higher stocking densities can assist with keeping the plant maturity more uniform and reduce selective grazing. These forages grow fast and recover from grazing fast as well. The most common mistake when spring grazing small cereals is letting the plant get ahead of the cattle. It is important to increase stocking density as the spring progresses to ensure the cattle can keep up with the rapid forage growth. This can be achieved by either adding more cattle or reducing the number of acres being grazed. A good starting point is about half a cow or 1 stocker calf per acre in early spring and increasing from there.

Like most cool-season grasses in early spring, small cereal forages are also high in potassium. This means there is a need to provide supplemental magnesium as potassium interferes with magnesium availability to the animal. Grass Tetany can be a real issue when grazing lush growing cereals because of this potassium content. A free choice mineral with a targeted 4 oz per day intake should contain at least 10% magnesium to prevent grass tetany in lactating cows and 5% magnesium to increase gains in stocker calves.

The key to getting the most out of grazing small cereal forages is managing the maturity by having the "right" amount of grazing pressure. K-State has a good publication discussing cereal grain crops called Small Cereal Grains for Forage MF-1072 to learn more about this topic. Visit the online bookstore to access all the Extension publications.

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Wait To Clean Up Your Yard

When we have nice weather during the midst of winter, we often feel tempted to go outside and get a jump start on our gardens by clearing brush and other dead vegetation from last summer. However, while we may feel ready to venture outside, the same is not true for all the critters in our yards and gardens.

Since we do not see insects buzzing around in the winter, you may assume they are all dead. In reality, many of these insects are hibernating, just like bears do in the winter. Some native bees nest down in the hollow stems of plants like coneflower and bee balm and would die if this vegetation is removed. Other bees are known to nest underground and would be disturbed by any raking or tilling. Underneath the leaf litter in your yard, there are likely lacewing eggs, butterfly, and moth larvae, and perhaps even a queen bumblebee seeking shelter. Leaf litter also attracts lady beetles, which will eat aphids in your garden in the summer.

While a garden full of debris might not look appealing to us, just know that all kinds of beneficial organisms are sleeping under the dead vegetation. By removing this vegetation or tilling the soil, we are killing the next generation of beneficial insects before they have the chance to emerge and contribute to a natural ecosystem.

When should you clean up your yard and garden? There are varying answers. You can track soil temperatures or air temperatures to try and estimate when insects may emerge. But the easiest way is to watch for insects. Look around and see if bees and butterflies are fluttering around. After you notice insects coming out from hiding, wait a few days and then start your clean up. If there are areas you do not plan on planting, you can always leave debris in place for future insects to nest in too.

By forgoing the pristine garden look for a more natural one, we can all work towards helping support these essential pollinators that play a significant role in our food chain.

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No news article this week.

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Cindy Williams
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No news article this week.