



Livestock for Landscapes

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Overcoming Our Brush Prejudice

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Prejudice: *an unfavorable opinion or feeling formed beforehand or without knowledge, thought, or reason. – Dictionary.com*

Grassist: *a person with a prejudiced belief that, for raising cows, grass is superior to all other vegetation. – Kathy Voth*

I have a confession to make. When I started my livestock career I had a strong prejudice against brush. For a time I worked diligently to develop simple techniques for creating fuel breaks in it or for eradicating it from pastures. And of course I used goats because, like everyone else, I was taught that “Goats are browsers and cows are grazers.”

But goats aren't for everybody, and when I couldn't convince western ranchers to use goats for weed control, I decided to teach the cows to eat them instead. The cows showed me they could eat weeds with just a little bit of training, and then one day in Marin, California at the Nicasio Native Grass Ranch the cows showed me something else. They showed me that they could do every bit as good a job on brush clearing as my goats ever did.

Most of the cows I've trained to eat weeds have become pretty open-minded about trying a little bit of everything in pasture. These particular cows were trained to eat distaff and Italian thistle, and they decided on their own to eat coyote bush, a species known to invade grasslands in the area. I videoed the cows grazing the bushes off at head-level, breaking large branches off with their heavy bodies in an effort to get at the best parts. It looked just like it would have had my herd of goats visited for the day. As my rancher, Peggy Rathmann said, “This is forage!”

When things you see with your own eyes are contrary to what you've been taught, it's time to take another look. So I've looked into cows as “browsers” or as animals that at least include brushy species in their diets. I have pictures of my trainees eating wild rose, willow, ash, and squaw bush. A longhorn producer sent me pictures of his cattle eating blackberry bushes, and a Utah State researcher sent me a picture of a cow eating mesquite in Mexico. Some farmers in Pennsylvania told me that their cattle eat multiflora rose. I figure if one cow can do it, every cow can, and if yours aren't, all they need is a little of the training I use to teach cows to eat weeds.

Science tells us that if an animal eats something, it is likely nutritious or at least meeting some individual need. So I looked into the nutritional value of brush species. It seems they can run from 8 to 24% protein. Oak brush and Russian olive average about 14% protein, multiflora rose runs from 10.5 to 12.8% and the berry species run from 15.5 to 21.1%. True, oak brush contains tannins which can harm cattle, but only if it makes up over 70% of their diet. Researchers at Utah State University have also discovered that polyethylene glycol, an additive used in human foods, can buffer the effects of tannins increasing the amount of tannin containing foods cattle will eat.

So, brush is nutritious, and cattle eat it. Here's some more good news. Brush species are almost a miracle forage. They leaf out and reproduce even during drought, put up shoots, and drop millions of seeds that can stay viable for 20 years or more, and many respond to fire and mowing by growing even faster. You might have thought those were problems before, because you were trying to grow pasture for your cattle and thought

you had to battle brush. But maybe now you might look at it a little differently. Besides, brush is good for wildlife and a Texas study found that one acre of “thicket” could offset the carbon produced by a car driving 26,000 miles in a year, giving us a couple more reasons to consider making it a part of our overall pasture plan.

If I haven't convinced you that brush is good, you can still use your cattle to clear your pastures. A 2003 Wisconsin experiment found that cattle grazing could be used to “open up” and restore overgrown oak savannah. They used 6 cow calf pairs in June, July and August in two treatments: 1) one day per acre per month, and 2) three days per acre per month. The cattle spent 34% of their time grazing brush, 35% grazing forbs, and 29% grazing grass. A photo comparison of the control pasture and a grazed pasture showed that the brush layer had been practically eliminated after the second year. They found that using 5,000 to 7,000 pounds of cattle per acre provided for reasonable weight gain and shrub removal. You can read more at: <http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wicst/pubs/oaksavarticle.htm>.

We all have prejudices. But often they don't serve us very well. If you're doing a lot of work to save your farm from brush and replace it with grass so your cows can eat it, maybe you could look at it from another perspective. We can make lemonade out of lemons, why not pasture out of brush? After all, the definition of pasture is: “Grass or other vegetation eaten as food by grazing animals.”

Should we focus more on “other vegetation?” It's just a thought.