

Farming according to Roll and Shirley

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Mr. and Mrs. Rolland Maxwell have been farming since 1964. Their 78 acres of lush fields near Lachute showed the lasting effects of well managed and planned regenerative practices. Of their 40 Ayrshires, 35 are milking to meet their 521 000 lb annual quota. They attribute much of their success in farming to a farm management course taken in 1965, just after having taken over the farm from Mr. Maxwell's parents. It was in this course that they reamed about rotational grazing. Since then, they have implemented this knowledge quRe successfully despite questioning glances from neighboring farmers.

Rotational Grazing

The rotational grazing management system used by the Maxwells consists of 26 acres of pasture divided into two acre sections and a four acre section on a hilltop. Pastures closest to the house are reserved for night grazing in order that the cows can be easily brought in the morning. The milking cows spend a maximum of 3 days/nights in each division depending on the growing conditions. Mr. Maxwell claims that he has plenty of pasture to support his 35 milkers during a dry season and exceeds their need if the season is wet and warm as it has been so far this year. When the pasture gets too far ahead it gets clipped, Mr. Maxwell says that he estimates 30% refusal if the grass gets too long. On the recommendation of the then local agronome (1965) the Maxwells seeded had of the 26 acres to an orchard grass/ladino mixture, the rest was later seeded down to Timothy. They soon discovered that the lading disappeared, particularly in the low lying areas of the fields. The four acres on the hill top are seeded to Timothy/alfalfa and when the cows are let into this section their milk production always increases dramatically. Their hay fields consisted of red clover, alfalfa, orchard grass and timothy. One year prior to tile draining, the Maxwells seeded reed canary grass in a wetland area of the farm to make use of this area. However the cows did not find the grass palatable and they found the grass difficult to get rid of. There is still a patch of about 5 acres in one of the fields dispite Roundup applications.

Weeds

There were few if any weeds in the fields whether pasture or crop such as barley or wheat. This was achieved by close monitoring. Mr Maxwell told us that "A good farmer walks his fields at least once a week" to identify problems. The Maxwells figure that if proper plant management in terms of fertilization and weed control is followed the chance that a serious weed problem will occur will be minimal.

While driving us between the fields on his second farm where they keep their replacement heifers, Mr. Maxwell pointed out the ditch areas which were full of wild parsnip, thistle and other weeds. He explained that he had applied Round-up the previous fall but had failed to seed anything. "This" he said, "is an example of what can happen when one eliminates weed species but fails to seed down a more desirable plant". He said that he will mow them this year but may have to resort to more drastic measures in the future.

NO CORN

The crops grown to feed his cattle are barley, wheat and hay. "No corn has ever been fed to my cows" he says with a grin, "and I don't need a silo either." He figures that if he had a larger herd a heap silo might be considered "but for now", he says, "my cows are doing just fine" and he can't justify the extra expense.',

Being of a regenerative mindset in that they want to make maximum use of the on farm resources, the Maxwells take care of their machinery and have used it till it's fairly well worn out. Their tractor of twenty years was traded in for a new model of the same size (44 H.P.) but with modern equipment such as power steering, remote controls and differential lock. One of their best buys in terms of machinery was their haytedder. They estimate that the hay dries a day earlier and consider it a must to make alfalfa hay.

The Maxwells are comfortable financially, Mr. Maxwell states that they have many more options in their farming practices than most farmers since they are debt-free and need very little income to keep the farm going. However, if they were young and had the tremendous debt load that new farmers have now they would become much more efficient and make use of every resource available on the farm. Mr. Maxwell said "My farm and my buildings may not be the most beautiful in the world but I don't care what anyone thinks, they're functional and efficient and inexpensive (mostly built by himself) and that's what is important. Too many farmers get themselves into financial trouble by starting too big, too fast and making their farm too nice. This incurs a great debt load which is hard to handle. They spend too much time considering how their farm looks rather than how it works."

The Maxwells overall philosophy is "If something works for you stick with it. Each farm is different and everyone has their own philosophy about how to manage it and that's farming according to Roll and Shirley".

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