

Bone Dry Ridge

A little bit of everything farm



Summer News 2020 from Bone Dry Ridge Farm

Sheep: I wanted to dedicate this newsletter to the sheep and let you know what we are experimenting with this summer. You might think that by now Keith and I would know just about everything there is to know about raising sheep, cows and pigs. But farming is one of those professions that has so many variables in just about everything one does, that it never really allows us to know it all. When we think we have something down, we fall on our faces and remember that we don't really know anything. Farming is a very humbling occupation, but we keep trying to tweak this and that. This summer we are doing something new with the sheep.

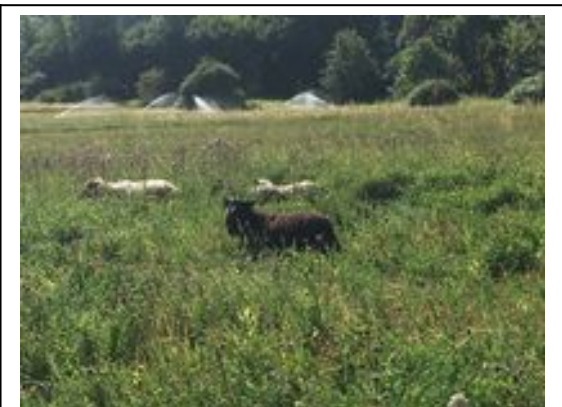


After and before grazing

One of the hardest parts with raising sheep is to keep their intestinal parasite load low. I know it is gross to think about this, but so much of farming has to do with poop and parasites. It is hard to get away from it. Sheep have numerous internal parasites. The sheep and the parasites have evolved together, and for the most part they coexist. But of course, like always, some parasites are worse than others. One of the worst is called Barberpole. If this parasite gets too numerous, it can literally suck the animal dry of blood. It attaches itself to the lining in the stomach and intestines and sucks blood.

The sheep do develop a resistance to the Barberpole but the animal's first year of life is usually the hardest one.

What we humans have done to address this issue is to produce medicine that kill these parasites. The medicines are very effective and most sheep farmers have gotten on the



Day one in the new patch

bandwagon of treating the animals two to three times a summer for worms. But there is the other side of things. These parasites have of course evolved and have become resistant to the medicine. How clever of them. Then we farmers give a higher dose or a different medicine to kill these critters. I'm sure you are seeing how this will end. In the end the little buggers will win and we will have high losses due to high parasite loads in our sheep. So, what to do? Here is where our experiment comes in. There are some plants that sheep eat that are high in tannins. These tannins

have the ability to change the stomach environment to make it inhospitable to these parasites. Also, most grazing animals in the world don't graze the same patch of grass over and over

again, they keep moving and don't come back to the same patch for some time. They are smart. They know how to live in their world. They do that to prevent themselves from picking up new parasites that they pooped out in the form of eggs, when they grazed there last time. But it is not just the animals that are smart. The Parasites are also smart. They have a life cycle that fits almost perfectly to the time when the grazing animal feels like coming back to that patch to eat. They climb up onto the tips of the grasses so they will be eaten by, in our case, the sheep.



Birdsfoot Trefoil, Sainfoin and other plants

Keith and I planted a new field this summer with grasses and legumes that sheep like to eat and that are high in tannins and therefore not very parasite friendly. These are, among other things, Birdsfoot trefoil and Sainfoin. We planted 16 acres of this stuff and our sheep have been grazing there since early July. We move them every week to a fresh new patch and are hoping to not have to have them come back to the beginning for at least 8 weeks. By which time the parasites that were pooped out in the form of eggs will have hatched out, climbed up to the tip of the grasses and have been baked by the sun, and therefore dead when the sheep come back. Pretty cool, right? Yeh, we think so also. Here is where the humbling part comes in. Sure, this may work this year, but will it work next year and the year after that and the year after that? That is the question we are hoping to get an answer to. There are many factors. Some of them are; How long can a parasitic egg live in the ground? How does the weather play a role in this? Does irrigating the pastures help the parasite to live longer? Etc and etc. There are also of course the factors we don't know about. The factors we don't even have the right questions for. Oh farming. So many questions and not that many answers.

Take care. Your farmers and shepherdess

Selma and Keith