

## IS MY ALFALFA SAFE TO GRAZE

One question I am asked every fall is “Is my alfalfa safe to graze?”. Do you sometimes have that question?

Is my alfalfa safe to graze? When I hear that question I can almost imagine the scenarios from which it comes. Usually corn stalks are ready to be grazed. It would be convenient and useful to include an adjacent alfalfa field for extra grazing and protein. The other scenario has grazing ending on summer range but the final growth of alfalfa is still standing in the field.

Usually the alfalfa is still quite green, despite several nights with low temperatures in the twenties or even teens. There may be some wilting and yellowing but most leaves still are attached to the plant stems.

The real question often being asked is “Can I be sure my cows won’t bloat and die if they graze my alfalfa?”. To be quite honest, you never can be 100 percent certain that alfalfa won’t cause bloat. I remember back to my father’s small dairy farm. Over the years that I helped on his farm, my dad had two cows that would bloat even when eating dry alfalfa hay. Since they were good milkers he didn’t want to cull them. So those cows were hand fed small amounts of alfalfa hay at a time so their bloat could be minimized.

Thus, the only true answer to questions about grazing alfalfa safety is ‘probably’. But still use good animal husbandry methods to reduce the risk. Have cows full before turning out to alfalfa. Wait until mid-day, after frost or dew is gone, before turning out. Provide other dry, palatable feeds or even bloat retardants. And keep a close eye on them for at least the first couple days.

Alfalfa can be grazed safely. Just be careful and realistic.

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