

Silvopasturing in New York

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Grazing domestic livestock in wooded areas is a common practice in many parts of the world and other regions of the United States, but became taboo in the Northeast in the latter-half of the 20th century when foresters and conservationists began to educate farmers on the potential harmful impacts of allowing livestock in the woods. Damages included excessive soil compaction, debarking, and excess browsing.

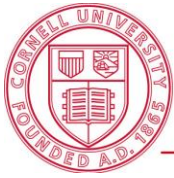


But in the modern world of invasive plants, high land ownership costs, and other challenges to healthy and sustainable woodlands, it is worth taking another look at livestock grazing as an acceptable and valuable tool for the management of some woodlots. The purposeful and managed grazing of livestock in the woods, known as *silvopasturing*, differs from woodlot grazing of the past in that the frequency and intensity of the grazing is controlled to achieve the desired objectives. New fencing systems, a better understanding of animal behavior and the evolution of “management intensive grazing” practices have enabled us to gain the necessary level of control over livestock to achieve positive impacts from silvopasturing.

Silvopasturing is not appropriate for every operation or every woodlot as it requires a commitment to caring for animals, and to enclosing areas with a secure fence to keep livestock in and predators out. Likewise, silvopastures on poor growing sites, rough terrain, or with difficult access would have fewer advantages than the converse. Care should also be taken to identify and protect unique ecosystems and high-value wildlife habitat, such as vernal pools and wooded wetlands when developing silvopasture areas.

In addition to starting with the right location, the most important key for success is skilled management of the system. This requires considerable knowledge of both silviculture and grazing. But limited experience shouldn't discourage others from exploring the potential of silvopasturing on their property. There are a number of ways that one can jump ahead on the learning curve:

- Look for on-line resources. There are a number of temperate agroforestry sites with good articles and information on silvopasturing, though much of the information will need to be extrapolated to your own situation. The “Guide to Silvopasturing in the Northeast” is currently available under the “publications” section of <http://forestconnect.info>
- Develop woodlot management and animal husbandry skills independently, and then gradually look for ways to symbiotically combine the two systems in a context appropriate for your own property
- Seek out local examples of innovative graziers to see what has worked for them
- Work with a forester who is willing to help you learn and experiment. Expect some resistance at first when you mention the word “silvopasturing”, but foresters are trained to achieve landowner goals. They may be lacking in knowledge on the livestock side of the equation, but their expertise in vegetation and forest management will be invaluable.



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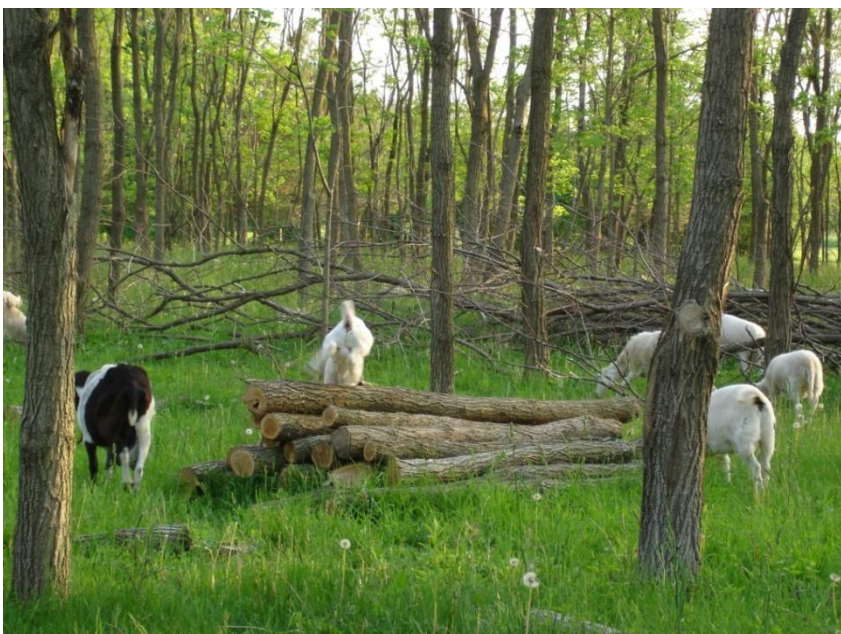
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Livestock can be used to organically manage undesirable vegetation in the woods that interferes with goals ranging from aesthetics to wildlife and everything in between. But simply turning animals into an area infested with problematic plants like buckthorn or beech brush, and then expecting good results is unrealistic. Carefully controlled grazing with the right kinds of livestock at the right time of the year is just part of a larger strategy to deal with nuisance plants. In severely over-grown areas, heavy-duty mowing may be necessary to reduce the height of the target vegetation. Animals then do the rest by browsing the coppice sprouts and other re-growth until weakened and eliminated. There are numerous other creative strategies for reducing overgrown areas to a more manageable browsing height if a local mowing contractor cannot be found. Likewise, there are a number of practical ways to grow-back desirable plants when the time is right, so creating a silvopasture does not exclude the option of natural regeneration in the future.

One economic benefits of silvopasturing is the generation of frequent, short-term revenues from the wooded portions of properties through the production of valuable goods ranging from breeding stock to quality foods and fibers. These same items can be used for personal benefit and self-sufficiency, which increase the overall enjoyment and utility of woodland. The sale of silvopasture products and the conversion of wooded areas into silvopastures may also help farmers and woodland owners qualify for important property tax abatement programs such as Ag Assessment (NYS RP 305 Program) and the 480-A Forest Tax Law.

Some other important points to consider before taking the plunge into silvopasturing are the time, investment and dedication required to succeed. Develop a written start-up plan for your project that outlines *where, when, what, why, how and how much* you can spend in terms of both time and money. If you have never raised livestock before, take time to speak with livestock specialists from Cooperative Extension and ask them to refer you to other producers who may share helpful advice. Start small because it will be better to make the inevitable mistakes on a smaller scale, but don't let the fear of initial failure prevent you from exploring the exciting opportunities of silvopasturing!



There are many examples of silvopasturing that range from enriching a pasture with a few trees for shade, mast and aesthetics, to grazing in relatively dense wooded area. But from a livestock perspective, the silvopasture is only as good as the quality and quantity of food available to them. Here, sheep and goats enjoy lush cool season grasses and black locust sprouts in a walnut/locust plantation that was recently thinned for thousands of dollars worth of posts.

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