

Silvopasturing in New York

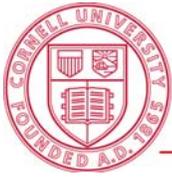
Grazing domestic livestock in wooded areas is a common practice in many parts of the world and other regions of the United States, but became taboo in the northeast in the later half of the 20th century when foresters and conservationists began to educate farmers on the potential harmful impacts of allowing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

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” have enabled us to gain the necessary level of control over livestock to achieve positive impacts from woodland grazing.

Silvopasturing isn't for every woodland owner or every woodlot as it requires a commitment to caring for animals and enclosing portions of the woods with a secure fence to keep your animals in and predators out. Wooded areas on poor growing sites, rough terrain, or with difficult access would obviously have fewer advantages for successful silvopasturing than the converse. But the most important key for success is skilled management of the system. This requires considerable knowledge of both silviculture and grazing. If grazing and silviculture are the “artful application of science”, then combining the two systems is certainly a fine art! But this shouldn't discourage the novice from exploring the potential of silvopasturing on their property, even though results are likely to improve with increased skill and experience.

With that said, there are a number of ways that a woodland owner can jump ahead on the silvopasture 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 New York” will be available by the end of the year through CCE's Agroforestry Center in Acra, NY (<http://www.agroforestrycenter.org>) which will provide detailed technical information for a variety of situations.
- Develop woodlot management and animal husbandry skills independently, 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 “silvograziers” to see what has worked well for them (and not so well).
- 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 on the livestock side of the equation, but their knowledge of vegetation management and forest stand dynamics will be invaluable.



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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 the problem to disappear 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 you can't find a local mowing contractor. Likewise, there are a number of viable ways to grow-back desirable plants when the time is right, so creating a silvopasture doesn't exclude the future use of natural regeneration.

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 can also contribute to Ag Assessment (NYS RP 305 Program) eligibility requirements, thereby allowing landowners to take advantage of an important tax abatement program on wooded pastures that may not otherwise qualify for 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, ranging 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. Here, goats and sheep enjoy lush cool season grasses and black locust sprouts in a walnut/locust plantation that was recently thinned for thousands of dollars worth of fence posts.

The author, Brett Chedzoy, is a forester for the Cornell Cooperative Extension South Central New York Agriculture Team, and in his free time raises hair sheep, goats and black angus cattle on his family's farm near Watkins Glen, NY. Brett may be reached by email at: bjc226@cornell.edu