

OPERATING A PROFITABLE SMALL FARM

FACT SHEET 11

Season Extension

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I. Why Extend the Season?

There are some small/part-time producers who are quite satisfied with the typical cropping season. They are willing to begin growing crops when it warms up in the spring and are ready to retire for a long winters rest when it gets cold. However, there are those producers who need to maximize as much production as possible from their limited acres and also enjoy the added period of farm work. An added benefit to season extending is that early crops get the highest price. If you can exploit the “Law of Supply and Demand”, you can become very profitable.

II. Modifying the Climate

There are several options and variations of climate modification available to producers. The choices will come down to how much money you have and what are your production goals. Greenhouses provide the top of the line in climate control. They provide the producer with a great deal of flexibility in setting production goals. Greenhouses unfortunately are out of most small farm budgets. Cold frames and plastic mulches are proven methods of getting crops off to early starts in the season. Cold frames protect young crops from severe cold and toughen them up so they can be transplanted early into the field. Plastic mulches can be used to warm up the soil to help improve the growing conditions for the early crops. Row covers and plastic tunnels are a variation of a poor man’s greenhouse. These can be as low as the crop or high enough to walk through. These crop protectors have gained in popularity. They are effective at helping to get crops off to an early start and they are not expensive to construct.

III. Diversity and Crop Planting Dates

Season extending does not rest entirely with climate modification. Producers have a great deal of flexibility in determining their cropping season length by the selection of the crops they plant, the crop varieties used, and the dates they plant these crops. The diversity of crops a producer selects can span the better part of a year. Selecting cold hardy crops for early spring growth and late fall production will bridge the gap between the warm weather crops. Selecting early and late maturing varieties of crops is another means of extending the season. Crop varieties can vary two to three weeks in maturity; this provides early and sustained production. Staggering the planting date of a crop will provide similar results. Spreading the planting date two weeks apart helps to spread out production. Diversified production not only helps to spread out the cash flow for the season, but also helps to protect against field loss. Should a crop pest or adverse weather hit, it is less likely to wipe out crops at varied stages of development or different types of crops.

IV. Extended Grazing

Crop producers are not the only farmers who sometimes want to extend the growing season. Livestock producers often seek to extend the grazing season as a means of reducing feed costs. Feeding animals over the winter can amount to a significant portion of the overall cost of maintaining an animal.

Extended grazing or year around grazing systems can provide big savings to producers and could make a difference in profitability. Following the example of the crop producers, livestock producers can spread out the grazing season by varying the crop varieties and species. Maturity dates vary in forage crops as with other crops. There are also forage crops that produce the majority of their growth during the spring, summer, or fall. Producers can use the production peaks of these forage species to spread production over the season.

Crop residues and stockpiled forage can be used to further extend grazing into the colder portion of fall and winter. Corn stalks and other crop residues can provide livestock decent winter feed with only minimal supplement. Stockpiled tall fescue and orchardgrass provide excellent extended grazing for livestock. Tall fescue or orchardgrass pastures, that are not grazed after early August will amass considerable amounts of dry matter that can be grazed when needed in late fall. Orchardgrass will maintain its quality until late in the year, but does not usually go beyond December. While orchardgrass is known for its good quality, tall fescue is known for its lack of palatability. Stockpiling will actually improve the palatability of tall fescue. The sugar content in tall fescue increases when it has been frosted, so animals love to eat it. In addition, tall fescue stays greener longer through the winter than all other forages.

Reference: *The New Organic Grower* by Eliot Coleman