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Holding a Successful Pasture Walk

Prudent Planning, Ice Cream & Common Sense



People gather for a pasture walk on the author's farm — *Bishopp Family Farm in Deansboro, New York.*

by *Troy Bishopp*

My wife Corrine is an awesome chef because she skillfully and artfully prepares delicious dishes from recipes handed down by generations of practical family cooks. Like many in the culinary realm, she instinctually knows how to create a masterpiece with a little pinch of this and a smidgeon of that. The approval rating comes when she sees the anticipating smiles, hears the mmmms and discovers there are no leftovers.

The recipe for holding a successful pasture walk follows along the same theme. To get folks off the farm you need a little bit of this and a little bit of that. After the last six years of co-organizing sold-out grazing events, one tenet stands out to me for gathering a bunch of people together. It's the phrase: *"A good meeting with homemade ice cream and local food is great and a bad meeting with homemade ice cream and local food is still good."* This strategy hasn't let us down

yet but can be a little daunting when a hundred farmers show up for a three-hour romp through the pastures.

The first ingredient to enticing pasture walkgoers is planning and creating an outreach buzz. As a grass farmer and conservation agency professional, I regularly consult with my local farmer steering committees to brainstorm ideas, topics and activities, when it's convenient for them to attend, not me necessarily, who will host and contemplate what goodies will we offer. I usually try and locate some outside talent or perspective from a farmer who is considered extra knowledgeable because they live more than 50 miles away. Because I'm the media spin doctor, it's never "just a walk."

The easiest buzz to create is bringing in talent like a Greg Judy, Jim Gerrish, Joel Salatin or Shannon Hayes among many others who have authored practical books. We once brought in the Nebraskan "Grass Freak," Kevin Fulton because he could create a spectacle by

lifting an Amish Buggy full of children and ripping a phonebook in half. Other pasture walk presenters have focused on animal behavior, key-line design, measuring brix, identifying grass species, looking for dung beetles and reading the land, biologically. I also spin the host farmers who can be a colorful lot too with their gateless fencing strategies, squirt gun medicine applicators, augmented float valves, clover seeding the backs of cows and various pastured poultry pen designs.

Farmers are especially sensitive to timing their attendance around chores and weather, which is why we normally have twilight meetings and Saturday morning get-togethers. This mindset consistently assures we have a good farmer-to-agency personnel ratio, if you know what I mean. Another somewhat confusing facet is we normally hold our walks in the latter part of summer and fall because we want to see how to grow quality forage in the tougher reaches of

the grazing season, not when everybody grows grass in May and June.

Another feature to holding a fruitful event is to understand the complexities of pasture walk etiquette. You should put yourself in the guest's mind. What's in it for me? How will this help me at my own farm? What is my comfort zone? Can I ask questions without fear? Will I meet some new friends?

It's the job of the evening's facilitator to make folks feel comfortable and introduce the host farm family, special guests, the goals for the event and to keep the conversation lively and feet moving. It's also imperative to project that it will be a fun and relaxing time.

Most pasture groups I have led like a little vigor in the discussion and don't necessarily like every topic neat and clean. I vividly remember a debate on the reseeding of pastures where everyone had a spirited opinion but it really didn't matter because most ideas didn't jive with the host's goals or wallet. It was a great brainstorming and bonding moment however, which created other harmonious conversations through the evening.

The pasture experience should never be hijacked by a paper-wielding agency type pushing this or that program or an overzealous salesman especially if the flow of the meeting is going well with lots of visiting. And watch out for the bombers that just like to hear themselves



Cows grazing under some tumble wheels during a pasture walk at the author's farm.

talk about how much they think they know. Usually they will succumb to the pressure of the group dynamics and find their place within the herd without incident.

There is a distinct phase when the children get restless with visions of goodies promised by parents for coming and walking through cow pies. This precipitates the most important part of any meeting — the fellowship when folks share stories over ice cream and

local fare. What happens is you call the graziers in from their hike and they act pretty much like their ruminant buddies. There are the leaders, the in-betweeners and the followers. We have been doing this so long that we have developed an efficient food chain. I am always positioned to scoop the ice cream after they have collected their drink, napkin, brownie or homemade donut (still warm from Mrs. Yoder's kitchen)

with one fitting dollop of hand-cranked heavenly goodness.

We deal with farmers' appetites by the gallon. In fact, John Troyer gauged a group of 70 probably couldn't polish off his six-gallon freezer of vanilla with a

chaser of 10 dozen glazed donuts. We all underestimated how much sugar a bunch of farmers, kids and neighbors can consume over conversations and laughter. I'm guessing they would have enough residual sucrose for the next few days.



Daniel Kline hosting a pastured pig pasture walk.



Homemade ice cream (*Grazier's Choice*) made with little cows and pigs grazing in green mint chocolate chip by Roc-star Ice Cream in Waterville, New York for a Graze NY pasture walk.

There has never been a twilight meeting I can recall that has not lasted until well past dark. I have heard folks exchanging phone numbers, email addresses, suppliers and inviting newfound friends over for a visit. It's satisfying to just stand there, listen and enjoy people making connections and telling stories. I'll admit this recipe is really a social event disguised as an educational event.

Most in the agency/extension facilitator world get paralyzed in putting on workshops because of cost. We are of the mindset to leverage our own (farmer) resources with that of a sponsoring organization. Most local meetings we put together are under \$200. Our grazing groups share the cooking duties and we usually partner with a different sponsor every time. We also compensate the farm host for their time too.

Some of our most ardent grazing supporters include The Upper Susquehanna Coalition, Local Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Organic Milk Companies, NESARE, The Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative, RC&D Councils, The NYS AEM Program and the Cornell Small Farms Program, to name a few. We find no trouble getting sponsors because we are frugal with the resources and show tremendous positive results through media outlets, pictures and thank you letters.

This formula for successful, hands-on, fun and delicious pasture walks that create lasting memories can be summed up by keeping the ingredients simple with a little pinch of farmer common sense. The approval rating comes when you see the anticipating smiles, hears the *mmms* and discover there are no leftovers.

In the words of Daniel Kline, Jr. of Ingallsdale Meadows Farm, "*Pasture walks and homemade ice cream is a beautiful thing!*"

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