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District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

### ***Post-Harvest Hay Field Evaluations***

Harvest for hay may be a greater stress on our forage stands than we'd like to give it credit for. We know from grazing studies if we remove 80 percent of a plant's leaf area, we stop root growth for as long as 12 days. Haying often does that – and maybe more.

Now is a good time to return to previously harvested stands for a follow up look as to how they are responding. With any luck, recent moisture events and cooler temperatures have helped the recovery process. As you walk across stands, make a mental note of areas where regrowth is occurring – and where it is not. Soil type differences are a major factor affecting grass recovery and regrowth levels highlights those differences rather vividly. Ground truth soil type differences by taking soil cores across the field to compare soil depth and moisture.

It's also a good time to check post-harvest weed pressure. It's not uncommon to get a few ironweed scattered across a field and often a few broadleaf weeds won't do much harm. If those weeds are hemp dogbane or sericea, however, a post-harvest or late summer treatment plan may be of value. Keep an eye on the grasses you are seeing as well. Just because it's green doesn't mean it's our desired cool season grass. Summer annual grasses (foxtail, etc...) have increased in many stands, and while there may not be enough to worry about, they can take up valuable moisture cool season grasses will need to recover. Sedges have increased in many stands as well. Monitor invasive grass like weeds now so they don't become larger issues later.

Last but not least, monitor for insect feeding. Fall armyworm moths are likely present in the southern reaches of the state, and while our trapping network here in NEK (four sites in two counties across the District) has yet to yield evidence of moth flights, it's good to look for feeding. Most stands can tolerate a little feeding, but stressed stands in particular can be heavily damaged when feeding is heavy.

There are a lot of factors that will affect next year's hay crop – and some of them are influencing that stand already. Evaluations now can help us better manage some of those influences for the positive, while giving us a head start on management for next year as well.

Ross Mosteller  
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

### **Cull Cow Marketing**

One of my favorite classes in livestock judging contests are keep/cull classes. Not only do I appreciate that these classes typically involve data, but also knowing which animals to keep as breeders and which to cull from the herd/flock is a true life skill. The term cull might have a negative connotation, but rigorous culling standards will lead to a better herd in the future. Cull animals have substantial value to the operation, so making the most out of a “cull” is important.

For beef cows, the summer months provide a seasonal opportunity to capture value in marketing cull cows. This lines up well with traditional fall calving cow weaning time and can play into early weaning strategies for spring calving herds. The first thing that needs to be determined with cows near weaning, is which will stay in the herd as producers and who will leave as culls. The current historically low cow numbers, high cull cow prices and ongoing regionally dry conditions give even more reason to work to capture the most value possible.

The four “O” rule should be the gold standard by which a producer makes culling decisions. This rule states, cull your Open, Old, Ornerly, and Odd/Out/Off cows. The first three make good sense at any time, but if numbers need to be adjusted more, the fourth O of “odd” comes into play. These are cows that don’t fit your production system. They can be cows: with a bad udder, either larger or smaller framed, a completely different genetic package, hair coat color diluter, late breeder, bad eye or any other number of things can be considered.

Cull cows generally comprise 10 to 20 percent of the cow/calf enterprise income. Thus, it is beneficial to consider when and how those animals will be marketed. Feed inventories have been strained in the broader region, but if adequate feed is on hand, it might make financial sense to feed cull cows at certain times of the year. Here are a few points to keep in mind when considering how to add value.

- Sell cows outside seasonal marketing windows. Cull cow prices are normally lowest in October through January. If possible, consider marketing between February and September when cow slaughter rates are lower.
- Add weight to thin cows before selling, particularly when cows are BCS 3 or lower at culling. Use high quality forage or grain diets to replenish muscle mass on cows. Target a BCS of 5 for light muscled cows and BCS 5 to 6 for heavier muscled cows.
- Cull old cows before they lose their teeth, decline in body condition, fail to breed or die.
- Sell cows before they become fat (BCS 8 to 9). Fat cows are discounted for low lean yield regardless of their potential to have higher quality grade classification.
- Bids are often very competitive at local auctions, but for some producers it might make sense to direct market to a packer. This can be beneficial for operations who have a good handle on their carcass quality, can feed cows efficiently and market larger lots.
- Don’t forget to keep a focus on quality and safety. Bruising is a major problem with cull cow, most of which are caused by rough handling and hauling. Give attention to withdrawal times when cows have been treated with animal health products.

Remember, the cow is an extremely important part of the total beef cow/calf enterprise, so management of her can affect your productivity and profitability. Keeping a cow in the herd with problems will propagate onto subsequent generations. Oklahoma State University has a good publication that discusses this topic in greater detail. <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/print-publications/agec/cull-cow-grazing-and-marketing-opportunities-agec-613.pdf> Good luck with your culling decisions!

Laura Phillips  
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

## **Organic Mulches for Your Garden**

Organic mulch, or mulch made from plant materials, can make a big difference in your garden. It can improve your soil, lock in moisture, prevent weeds, and act as insulation that prevents soil temperatures from getting too high. Not all mulch, however, has the same impact on your garden. Before mulching it is important to understand how mulches differ in longevity, density, size, water retention, and color.

The longevity of mulch depends on how fast it decomposes. Materials like leaves, grass clippings, paper, or straw will break down quickly, which is a bonus for those looking to improve their soil quality and add more nutrients. Woodchips will generally take longer to decompose; cedar and cypress take the longest to decompose and can last three or more years.

Decomposition time is also dependent on the size of the mulch particles. Larger wood chips will take longer to decompose than smaller ones. That does not mean you should reach for the finest mulch you can get if you want fast decomposition. Very fine mulches like sawdust or thin wood shavings can compact, creating a seal over the surface of the soil. This will limit air movement and reduce water infiltration, causing more problems for your garden.

As long as your mulch does not compact, you will see increased moisture retention. Mulch traps water that would normally run off the soil during larger rains, increasing how much water infiltrates your soil. Mulch then retains the water by protecting the surface of the soil from the sun and heat, reducing water evaporation from the soil. While mulch reduces irrigation needs, it will not eliminate your need to water, especially for plants with shallow roots.

Surprisingly, the color of your mulch can also impact your soil and its temperature. In general, mulch acts as a layer of insulation, preventing the sun from heating up the soil. Darker color mulches will absorb more heat, providing less protection from the heat than lighter-colored mulches. Many mulches are dyed a certain color for aesthetic purposes. Although many gardeners worry about the impact of the dye, there is not any evidence that the dyes used in mulch have any impact on plants or soils.

When using mulch, there are a few considerations. First is the depth. Wood chip mulch should be 3 to 4 inches deep. Too much mulch can stop water and air from reaching the soil. Grasses or leaves should be applied more sparingly, as thick layers of these materials can promote mold. Piling up mulch around the bases of trees or shrubs is also not recommended, as it traps moisture against the bark and can cause crown or root rot. Instead, create a donut shape of mulch around larger woody plants.

The second consideration is your nitrogen levels. While wood or bark is decomposing, it draws in nitrogen to help with the decomposition process. If you mix your mulch and soil together, it can pull nitrogen away from plants. Mulching on the soil surface will draw nitrogen away from only the top layer. Perennials with deep roots are not likely to be affected, but annuals or plants with shallow roots can require supplemental nitrogen.

Further reading:

<https://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/mulches-for-home-grounds-7-214/#:~:text=Organic%20mulches%20include%20woodchips%2C%20bark,and%20it%20breaks%20down%20slowly.>

<https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/ec1629/html>

Teresa Hatfield  
District Extension Agent, Family and Community Wellness

### **Stopping Medical Identity Theft**

Medical identity theft occurs when someone steals your personal information in the form of an insurance card number, Medicare number, or Medicare Advantage plan number. They then use this information to make fraudulent claims on your behalf for services or prescriptions you did not receive. Examples of healthcare fraud include medical treatments, medical equipment purchases, prescription drugs, and other healthcare services. Healthcare fraud involves billions of dollars annually and can even impact your health.

The problem with medical identity continues to grow. Victims tend to spend more money clearer up medical identity theft than regular financial identity theft. Victims face trying to resolve issues with debt collection for medical services they never receive. Medical identity theft can also have adverse impacts on your health. The results of medical identity theft can linger for years, impacting credit scores and personal finances. Medical identity theft can also affect your health. If they use your information to treat someone else, their health information could wind up on your medical record, potentially leading to adverse consequences to your health.

So, what are the warning signs that your medical information is compromised?

- You get a bill for a medical service or procedure you did not have.
- A debt collector contacts you about a medical bill you are unfamiliar with.
- Your Explanation of Benefits (EOB) or Medicare Summary Notice (MSN) contains services you didn't receive.
- Your health plan stated that you have reached your maximum benefit.
- Your free credit report includes healthcare expenses you don't recognize.

There are some things you can do to prevent medical identity theft. Be alert if someone asks you for your personal medical information on the phone, arrives at your door, through email correspondence, or at a health fair.

- Be selective on whom you give your personal medical information; restrict the information to your doctor, health care provider, or other trusted representative.
- Never give out your medical information to someone you did not contact first.
- Remember that Medicare or Social Security will not contact you through the phone, email, or text; they already have your information and don't need to "verify" it.
- Do fall for "free" door-to-door testing, treatments, or supplies for genetic disease, cancer, or COVID-19.
- Don't click on links to unfamiliar sources; this could put your computer at risk for viruses and malware.
- Be cautious if purchasing medical supplies from unknown or unfamiliar suppliers.

Even with all good intentions, we still may become victims of medical identity theft. If you believe you are a victim, you must act now.

- Review your medical record and report any errors.
- Place a fraud alert with the three credit bureaus.
  1. Experian.com/help - 888-EXPERIAN (888-397-3742)
  2. TransUnion.com/credit-help - 888-909-8872
  3. Equifax.com/personal/credit-report-services - 800-685-1111
- Report identity theft to the Federal Trade Commission at 1-877-438-4338 or [www.identitytheft.gov](http://www.identitytheft.gov). You can also start a personal recovery plan.
- Contact each doctor, clinic, hospital, pharmacy, laboratory, and health plan where the thief may have used your information. Ask for copies of your medical records.

July 7, 2023

- Complete the providers' records request forms and pay any fees required to get copies of your records.
- If you are on Medicare, contact 1-800-Medicare or your local Senior Health Insurance Counseling for Kansas office at 1-800-860-5260.

If you have questions about medical identity theft, contact Teresa Hatfield with the Meadowlark Extension office at 785-364-4125.

Cindy Williams  
District Extension Agent, Family & Community Wellness

### **Avoiding Some Food Preservation Mistakes**

Recently, I conducted two Jams and Jellies workshops for the Meadowlark Extension District. This stimulated many questions of which I would like to address in my column today. Someone asked me, “do people really do this?” Unfortunately, yes, so I would like to help correct any misunderstandings and help home canners to find a safer method of home canning. One of these unsafe methods of canning is making sun pickles.

The internet abounds with untested, and potentially unsafe canning recipes. Only use USDA tested resources. If you aren’t sure, please contact me and I will be glad to help you determine if it’s a tested, safe resource. A couple of ways to tell to avoid any recipes that are older than 1994. Lots of testing and changes in processing times were re-evaluated and many changes made. Also, you can be sure it’s a tested recipe if it’s from any USDA tested site or source like K-State Research and Extension or any extension/university from other states like Purdue University, University of Nebraska, etc. Again, if you aren’t sure contact me and I would be glad to help you with this. Be very careful with recipe magazines and canning recipes as they may not be tested. Contact me and I would be glad to assist you with this.

Avoid sun canning or sun pickles. This is more common in the western part of Kansas, but still very unsafe. Along with that I need to mention that sun tea is very unsafe for the same reasons. Sun pickles is where you fill a jar with cucumbers, add salt, and then fill with cold water. Apply the lid and ring. Then the jar is allowed to sit in the sun each day until the water turns from clear (at the start) to cloudy (in the middle of the process) and then clear again (at the end). According to the recipe when the water becomes clear again, the pickles are ready to use.

This type of recipe is **NOT SAFE!!!!** Whether it’s pickles, tea or canning, these types of recipes present a risk of illness linked to three major foodborne pathogens: E. coli O157:H7, Clostridium botulinum, and Listeria monocytogenes.

Why is this type of recipe unsafe?

\*The ratio of salt/water/cucumber is not defined. The precise ratio of these ingredients found in tested recipes allows good bacteria on cucumbers to grow and produce acid (and a safe product), and prevents pathogens (the harmful bacteria) from growing.

\*The temperature inside a jar sitting in the sun could rise above 72°F, too high for proper fermentation. High fermentation temperatures lead to spoilage or allow pathogen growth.

Another canning method that I get questions about is open kettle or oven canning. Open kettle canning has not been recommended for 30+ years. Open kettle canning involves heating the food to boiling, pouring it into the jar, applying lids, and allowing the heat of the jar to cause the lid to seal. The food is not heated adequately to destroy the spoilage organisms, molds and yeasts that can enter the jar while you are filling the jar, and it does not produce a strong seal on the jar. **These methods of open kettle and oven canning are not safe!!!!** Just because the lid seals, doesn’t mean it’s safe. The time saved with open kettle or oven canning is not worth the risk of food spoilage or illness.

Oven canning may sound simple, but oven heat is not the same as heat from a boiling water bath or from steam bath or from steam in a pressure canner. Placing jars in the dry heat of the oven may cause the glass to creak and shatter causing injury to you. Dry heat is not comparable to the moist heat of a boiling water bath. Processing in an oven will not heat the contents in the coldest part of the jar in the same way as boiling water. Oven heat will not increase the temperature inside the jar above boiling to be adequate to destroy botulism spores in low acid foods.

Yes, people do these types of unsafe canning and if you have any concerns or questions about home canning of foods, please contact me as we have several free resources that would be helpful to

July 7, 2023

you. Many of them are free and we also conducting pressure gauge testing of dial gauges only (not weighted gauges) for all brands of canners except All American canners. Got a question or concern, I can be reached at the Oskaloosa Office by calling 785-863-2212. I hope to hear from you soon!