

Canola is a valuable grazing crop

Article sourced from The Cattle Site

South African farmers are used to planting canola as a cash crop or a rotational crop to harvest the grain for canola oil. In the rest of the world it is a general practice to use it for grazing, silage, hay or in combination of grazing and a cash crop. It can be used to provide valuable grazing in the beginning and carry on to be a productive cash crop at the end of season.

Canola can be grazed when the canopy height is 15 to 20cm tall, but livestock should be removed when one third to half of the original forage remains.

Canola forage should not be grazed if the seed was treated with an insecticidal seed treatment. These seed treatments are systemic and can cause irritation when cattle consume the forage.

A slightly earlier planting date is advisable to allow for maximum forage growth prior to grazing, but adjustments to seeding rates are not necessary.

Adjust stocking rate

Stock the canola field when the canopy height is approximately 15 to 20cm. Generally, the most forage is available upon reaching the eight-leaf stage and canola grows vigorously at this stage.

Adjust the stocking rate so mostly new growth is consumed and remove cattle when only half of the original forage remains. Producers may use flash grazing, which means grazing the canola for a brief period of time, removing the cattle to allow re-growth, and then returning the cattle to the canola forage.

To better utilise the crop, graze canola with younger cattle rather than older cows. Smaller animals cause less physical damage to the canola plant.

No more than 75% of the animals' ration should be canola, with the other 25% consisting of a lower quality, high-fibre hay.

Since canola is relatively low in fibre, producers should exercise caution when introducing cattle to the forage and may want to consider a bloat preventer. Cattle should be full, near a source of fibre, and closely monitored when initially placed on canola pasture.

Making hay

Haying of canola should be done before it flowers. Being harvested before the crop goes into full pod stage, will make good feed for the winter. Mow with a roller mower conditioner to smash the stems as much as possible to help the stems dry enough.

Without this the feed may become moldy due to the crop's high moisture content. If the crop has to be left for a long period to dry, leaf material (which is better quality than the stalk and has higher palatability) will be lost when raking. Avoid raking if possible.

The plants take four to six days to dry to proper moisture levels (16 to 18% moisture content) for baling. In experiments in the United States (US), there were wide variations in yield (1 to 7t/ha), which could be due to difference in cultivars, growing conditions and rainfall.

Silage a good option

Silage might be a cheaper option than baling. Canola has a high moisture content of 75 to 80%. Consequently, seepage and effluent losses from the silage can be large. Wilting the crop to moisture levels of 60 to 65% (40% dry matter) will take time but crimping will hasten the drying process.

Ensiling the crop will reduce nitrate content by 30 to 70%, making the feed safe. The addition of bacterial silage inoculants may be beneficial when ensiling these crops, which are low in soluble carbohydrates.

Canola as a forage or silage crop should be treated similar to grain crops when cutting, chopping and packing. The one difference is that canola, with its hollow stems (full of moisture), takes about an extra day to dry down to the 60 to 65% moisture content level.

If baling silage, baling at drier than 45% dry matter may lead to poor packing and dry stalk ends. Baling too wet will result in poor foul smelling and low palatability silage due to the high protein contents. Some producers have had good results by filling the silage bunker with alternating layers of canola and grain crops cut for silage.

Higher yields in follow-up crops

It is a known fact that crop rotation with canola can lead to higher yields in follow-up crops such as maize, chicory, wheat and even grass-type pasture crops. Canola is a particularly suitable pasture and silage crop.

Early to medium-late canola types are on K2 Seed's product list. All cultivars are moderately tolerant against black stem.

Both Hyola 61 and Hyola 50 are suitable for grain and grazing. Both are conventional cultivars. Hyola 575 CL is a Clearfield® cultivar with high yield potential. Hyola 555 TT (Triazine®) exhibits outstanding plant vigour and takes approximately 80 to 87 days until flowering.