

Beautiful, ugly fields

Donna Myers

Donna spent several years raising cattle in Haute-Vienne, France, before returning to the United States in 2023. She now works as a writing consultant (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/donna-myers-writing-consultant>) but remains a regenerative farmer at heart.

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In 2018, my wife and I moved to Folles, France, to be the change we wanted to see in farming. Our goal was to produce high-quality food at affordable prices while achieving a low carbon footprint and high animal welfare. I'd read about rewilding, animal behaviour, regenerative agriculture and raising ruminants year-round on pasture without relying on hay. These ideals served as my compass while planning and managing our fledgling cattle farm located on the outskirts of a small village whose name means 'crazy' in English.

We raised ten Bretonne Pie Noirs, a rare French breed threatened with extinction due to its small stature and 'failure' to specialize. A lot of unavoidable expenses are per-animal, like identification and federally-mandated testing. This incentivizes farmers to garner as much meat and milk as possible from each 'animal unit' and to selectively breed for those specific traits. But that's not what I wanted. I wanted to go back in time, back before humans began commandeering cattle genetics, all the way back to 1884 – to the creation of the first Herd Book of the Bretonne Pie Noir. Our cattle weren't livestock units – they were beautiful, horned, petite black-and-white bovines perfectly capable of caring for themselves.

Our cattle traversed steep hillsides, rocky terrain, a marsh and two streams without ever injuring themselves. They grazed and browsed terrain that included wilted cherry leaves, bracken, foxglove, oak trees and other 'poisonous' fauna without getting sick. And they governed themselves, day in and day out, with very little interference from me.

My job, as I saw it, was to understand their social and biological needs, and to nurture an environment that empowered them to care for themselves. Feed a cow hay and she'll eat for a day; support the local ecosystem and she'll feed herself for a lifetime. That's what I hoped anyway, and in time, I found it to be true.

Our fields were seldom tidy. Depending on the season, passersby may have witnessed chest-high clumps of desiccated rye grass, stands of stinging nettles, swaths of bracken, unruly mounds of blackberry brambles, thistle in

various stages of maturity, reed canary grass matted beneath lounging cattle, thickets of blackthorn and hawthorn. This differed from the vast open spaces typical of rural France, with a hay ring as the focal point amid a carpet of short green grass dotted with cattle. Clearly, farmers cared about those well-kept fields that had been grazed, mowed to uniformity, perhaps even planted with a forage mix.

Tidy land is very clearly managed. Part of me covets that landscape because I appreciate order. Monocultures and planted forage mixes are pretty, like an English garden, with dozens of acres of symmetry and purpose. A uniform pasture is like a giant lawn that feeds livestock, and lots of farmers spend a lot of time and money tilling, seeding, fertilizing, harvesting, mowing and haying to ensure their crop succeeds.

Sometimes our unkempt fields felt like cheating. No tractor, no tilling. I strimmed brambles on occasion to keep them from taking over and at least once a year we had to strim beneath the fenceline to prevent the growth from sucking current from the electric fence, reducing the shock to a mere tingle. But no fertilizing, harvesting, mowing or haying. In this regard, our farm caused less ecosystem disruption than the massive fields of corn, soy and wheat that are generally considered more environmentally-friendly protein choices than beef.

We had four 'alleys', each with natural shelter and water from a stream or lake. Then we had 25 paddocks, somewhere between a quarter to half an acre each. If you think of the pasture like a house, each alley contained a bedroom, bathroom, living room and garden area, while each paddock was like a kitchen or local restaurant. The cows lived in the alleys and ate in the paddocks.

The herd remained in each alley for three weeks and didn't return for 60 days. While in the alley, I opened and closed gates to various paddocks so they could eat fresh forage, but they only got access to each paddock for a week or less. This way, each individual paddock rested for somewhere between two months to a year, depending on how much forage was available.

It was a little complicated but allowed me to break the parasite cycle instead of using dewormers, provided the cattle with nutrient-dense forage year-round and built soil organic matter. Our fields may have looked neglected, but they were actually carefully curated to ensure healthy soil, enhance biodiversity and provide vast dietary choices.

When cows enter a paddock, they explore the whole thing and eat all the best stuff. The next day, they do the same thing. So the longer they're in the same place, the worse the forage gets for them. Lower and lower quality every day. Until, that is, whatever they ate starts to regrow after a few days (depending on the season). The new stuff is the best stuff, packed with protein. So the cattle will grab it as soon as they find it.

This is bad for grass because it has borrowed capital from its roots, and it's supposed to repay the loan after the blades have grown long enough to capture sunlight and convert it into energy that the roots can use to grow. But the cows don't know this. They don't make long-term investments. For all they know, a predator's going to come to snatch them, so they might as well live for the moment.

So if they're in the same place for too long, they graze plants down to the nubs, weaken perennial grasses and create bare soil. When farmers don't rotate their livestock, the animals become the source of disturbance in ecological succession, inviting dreaded 'weeds' like thistle, dandelion and dock to take hold and 'destroy' a perfectly good paddock. But these maligned plants are just doing their job – cultivating soil so grass seeds can eventually take hold. It doesn't happen quickly, but the system is literally designed to reduce the 'weeds' in favour of the types of forage most farmers prefer.

My job as a regenerative farmer was to manage our livestock in a way that kept the fields hovering in the sweet spot where nature provides shelter and a wide array of nutrients from grasses, herbs, forbs, legumes, vines, brambles, bushes and trees.

By moving our cattle to a new paddock at least every week, we helped forage thrive and avoided patches of bare soil that would make life difficult for the hundreds of thousands of organisms that live beneath it. We had a bunch of different things in various stages of development: perennial ryegrass, meadow fescue, mallow, reed canary grass, chicory, plantain, wild carrot, curly dock, dandelion, oxeye daisy, Yorkshire fog, thistle, white clover, red clover, bird's foot trefoil, purple nettle, speedwell.

Our brown, waist-high grass offered seeds to native bird populations and infrastructure for spiderwebs. Those webs caught some of the flies that preyed on our cows, and birds preyed on both the flies and spiders. When wind blew the grass over, or it was flattened by ruminating cattle, it looked like wasted forage. But grass has more than one purpose on a regenerative farm. Grubs, crickets, beetles, moles, voles and earthworms all appreciate the insulating layer it provides, and plant roots appreciate aeration and fertilizer provided by those subsoil dwellers. And when the cattle lie on the matted grass, it's like lying on a blanket instead of a tile floor: it's less cold, less hot and softer. I used to watch them relaxing in the field, sometimes on their side like dogs lounging in the yard, and I'd smile because I knew they were comfortable.

They'd sprawl in the sun, ruminate in the rain, mosey to shade and run for cover when a storm rolled through. The hawthorn and blackthorn trees were particularly useful during periods of heavy wind and rain because they were like a natural barn. The thickets were so dense wind and rain could barely penetrate them. Yes, they took up grazing space, but they provided excellent shelter – not only to our cattle but to wildlife as well.

The two-inch spikes emerging from their branches deterred mammalian predators and created a paradise for nesting birds. Lots of caterpillars rely on hawthorn and blackthorn foliage, and their presence served as a readily-available protein source for birds. The surviving caterpillars became a variety of moths (hummingbird, lackey, magpie, swallow-tailed, yellow-tailed) and butterflies (red spotted purple, striped hairstreak and white admiral). And that diversity was supported by just two kinds of trees.

We allowed thistles to remain on our farm, despite a friend's suggestion that we cut them so the seeds wouldn't drift into neighbouring fields. I understood his concern, because they spread easily on bare soil and take up valuable

grazing space in a conventional system. But they produce more nectar per flower head than most wildflowers and are the main food source for caterpillars of the painted lady butterfly. Our cattle grazed young thistles on occasion, when they were rich in calcium, sodium, potassium, phosphorus, selenium and iron. And when they went to seed, they became a valuable source of nyger – small, high-oil, energy-packed seeds loved by finches, chickadees, juncos, sparrows, doves and buntings.

I found the vast swaths of stinging nettles on our property to be a painful nuisance, but everything in nature serves a purpose. I had never encountered stinging nettles before moving to France, so I had no idea why my hands were stinging and burning when I retrieved a ball my son had kicked into some weeds. I must've looked like a chimp seeing herself in the mirror for the first time. I rooted around for the ball, withdrew my hand because of the discomfort, stared at it, plunged it back into the nettles, then removed it and stared at it again. Stinging nettles have hollow hairs called trichomes, which are basically tiny syringes filled with neurotoxins and capped with a glass tip. Brushing against the nettle breaks the tip and causes the plant to inject toxins into the 'attacker'.

So why didn't we eradicate stinging nettles from our fields? Because although they're annoying, they're also awesome. They're the primary food source for caterpillars that become comma, peacock, red admiral and small tortoiseshell butterflies. Nettles are also high in protein, have anti-inflammatory properties, and contain antioxidants, vitamin A, vitamin C, and a bunch of minerals including cobalt, iron, molybdenum, nickel, potassium and zinc. Even when plenty of other forage was available, our cattle chose to include stinging nettles in their diet, usually in the summer when their sting wasn't as strong.

Nettles are so healthy I even decided to harvest some myself and turn them into tea. I pinched the tops off a bunch of plants, washed them in a colander, then laid them out in a dehydrator and crushed the dried leaves into tea. But it was like drinking the water left over after boiling spinach, so I decided to leave the nettles to the cattle.

Even now, knowing what I know, I still appreciate the beauty of conventionally-managed fields, and the effort that goes into keeping them that way. But the world needs more ugly fields. Animals, farmers, and the environment benefit more when ruminants roam pastures instead of machines.

Both farming methods require planning and labor; one works to force nature into compliance, while the other harnesses nature's workforce. One micromanages the environment in an effort to control what grows when, to what extent and exactly which nutrients will be available at any given time. The other macromanages the environment, empowering nature to nourish livestock and encouraging livestock to nourish themselves. One has higher up-front costs and a better short-term return; the other has lower up-front costs and better long-term returns.

One reflects life as we sometimes wish it would be: predictable, immediately rewarding, and within our control. The other reflects life as it actually is: complex, messy and utterly beautiful.



A field on the farm.



Caterpillars on nettle.