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Weeding With Geese

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Weeder geese are used with great success to control and eradicate troublesome grass and certain weeds in a variety of crops and plantings. The geese eat grass and young weeds as quickly as they appear, but do not touch certain cultivated plants.

Why do geese eat certain plants with relish while showing no interest whatsoever for others? Perhaps only a goose knows the answer. Nevertheless, farmers throughout the country take advantage of this unusual characteristic.

Geese work continuously from daylight to dark, seven days a week (even on bright, moonlit nights) nipping off the grass and weeds promptly as new growth appears. Geese remove grass and weeds next to plants that cannot be removed by hoeing or cultivation. Roots of the cultivated plants are not damaged as is so often the case with hoeing and machine cultivating. Geese also keep fence rows and irrigation ditches clean and work when the ground is too wet to hoe or cultivate.

Proper use of geese can practically eliminate the need to hoe and pull grass and weeds. Expensive hand labor is replaced. The University of Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station reports that using geese in cotton fields can save of \$35 or more per acre. This figure does not take into account costs of management and salvage value of geese at the end of the season. Similar savings appeared when weeder geese were compared with dalapon as a weed control treatment.

Clean fields mean increased yields, higher quality yields and easier harvesting. Geese are "manure spreaders" as well as "cultivators." They continually add fertilizer and organic matter to the soil.

How to use weeder geese

In general, weeder geese should be placed in the fields or plantings early in the season when grass and weed growth first starts to appear.

Under average conditions, two to four geese per acre are enough in row plantings. Usually no more than four geese per acre should ever be needed if they are put into fields when the first grass appears in spring. More may be required where plantings are in beds, since beds have a larger area where grass and weeds can grow. More geese also may be required if grass and weed infestation is heavy during wet seasons, or if grass and weeds have made considerable growth before geese are placed in the fields.

White Chinese geese are the favorites for weeding purposes, or Africans where a larger bird is desired for marketing at the end of the weeding season. These geese are more active and energetic than Toulouse and Emden, although those breeds are also used.

Management in the field

Brood day-old goslings to 6 to 8 weeks of age before placing them in fields permanently without shelter. Younger birds can be used if they are brought into shelter at night or in event of rain. Goslings can be turned out on grass within a few days and supplemental feeding of grain started the second week.

Water troughs should be placed in fields at the far end of rows so that geese will work the full length of rows on their way to drink. Water containers may be moved occasionally to make birds concentrate their efforts where they are most needed. If there are no trees in the field, provide temporary structures for shade. A common practice is to place cotton trailers in fields for this purpose.

Small amounts of supplemental feed must be provided. The amount required usually will range from 5 to 20 pounds a day per 100 birds. You have to learn the proper amount to feed through experience. Geese must have sufficient appetite to graze well, but at the same time they must be maintained in a strong, active condition.

Growing-mash pellets should be used as supplemental feed until at least 12 weeks of age. After this age, grain may be used if preferred. However, a small amount of chicken and turkey grower pellets (non-medicated) are recommended. Feed should be provided once per day in the evening and scattered so all birds will have an opportunity to pick up their share.

High fences are not required, since geese seldom fly. A 24- to 30-inch fence is sufficient. Poultry netting supported by stakes often is used where temporary fencing is desired. It is claimed that electric fencing will keep foxes and dogs out of fields.

Provide protection from foxes and stray dogs. Animals seldom attack during the day, so bring geese into a tight pen at night or use lights or flares where geese congregate at night.

Some insecticides are poisonous to geese, so remove geese from the field during spraying and do not return them for several days. In case of rain, do not return weeders to the field until puddles where insecticides may collect have soaked into the ground. Herbicides apparently are not harmful.

Marketing

If weeders are to be sold on a weight basis at the end of season, bring geese in from fields and place them in the pen for fattening. Feed birds all the grain they will consume three or four times daily. Continue for three or four weeks until geese weigh 10 to 12 pounds or more. Growing mash or fattening pellets must be fed with grain for efficient feed conversion.

Markets are highest during the four to six weeks before Thanksgiving and Christmas. Well-finished Emden, Toulouse and African geese are in best demand. Contact a poultry buyer or processor near you and arrange marketing details.

Carrying geese over from one season to the next is not recommended. Older geese are less active in hot weather than young birds. Adult geese will eat more Johnsongrass roots turned up during tillage than goslings, but are more difficult to restrain from crossing fences. It is usually less expensive to buy goslings in the spring than to carry old birds through the winter.

What crops can weeder geese be used for?

Cotton

Only two or three geese per acre are usually required to keep fields cleaned of Johnsongrass, nutgrass, Bermudagrass and other troublesome weeds. For best results, place five to six week-old goslings in the fields soon after cotton is planted. Yields are increased by keeping down grass and weed growth, and picking is made easier. Fields that might otherwise be too grassy can be machine picked.

Strawberries

Weeder geese have been used by strawberry growers for many years. They practically eliminate all hand labor. Usually six to eight geese per acre are required, depending on the amount of grass and weeds in the field. Geese are especially fond of crabgrass (usually the most troublesome weed in strawberry fields) and do a good job of controlling it. Five to six week-old goslings should be placed in the fields when weed growth first begins to appear. Allow them to remain until the berries start to ripen. The geese will eat the ripe fruit.

Nurseries

Weeder geese are especially valuable in nursery plantings because of the large amounts of expensive hand labor required. Nurserymen throughout the country use geese for weeding all types of plantings, including seedlings, flowering plants of various kinds, coniferous and hardwood shrubs, Christmas trees and all types of young fruit and shade trees.

The number of geese required per acre will vary from two or three in row plantings which are cultivated to six or eight per acre where grass and weed infestation is severe.

Corn

Farmers in the corn belt will find that goose production fits in well with corn production. While geese will consume young corn plants, they may be placed in the fields sometime after the last cultivation when the corn has been "laid by." They will clean out giant foxtail and other grasses and weeds, which makes for clean, fast picking. After corn is picked, the geese are allowed to remain in the fields to pick up the shattered grain to fatten for market. This practice also eliminates the problem of volunteer corn plants in soybeans or other crops following corn.

Orchards, groves and vineyards

In addition to keeping down grass and weed growth, geese will eat many kinds of windfall fruits that harbor damaging insects. Geese also keep down grass and weed growth along irrigation ditches.

Other uses

Weeder geese are used in tobacco fields. They may be used in truck and specialty crops. Growers of flowers for florist trade use geese in roses, iris, gladiolus, chrysanthemums, peonies, dahlias, and others. Geese also have been used by producers of sugar beets, potatoes, onions, raspberries,

blueberries, grapes, other small fruits, asparagus and mint.

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