

Prescribed Grazing FAQ

What is prescribed grazing?

Prescribed grazing is the controlled harvest of vegetation with grazing and/or browsing animals. This can mean keeping the right number of cattle on the right size pasture to ensure good recovery and growth of grasses, which helps prevent weeds. It can also mean using animals to remove certain plants in order to manage native vegetation.

Why is it happening in parks?

The City of Madison Parks Division uses prescribed grazing to manage woody species and promote the establishment of native vegetation. Grazing helps control invasive honeysuckle, buckthorn, and other brush that shades-out native grasses and wildflowers. It is used instead of mowing or herbicides to control brush in certain areas.

Why goats?

Goats are actually “browsers” instead of “grazers” like cattle. This means they prefer leaves of woody species (trees and shrubs) – our main targets. Goats can easily walk on steep slopes and climb over rocks and downed logs. Places that mowers can't go.

Is it effective?

Each goat eats an average of 8 pounds of vegetation per day, and spends 12-16 hours doing it! The plants that are browsed re-sprout and grow new leaves multiple times each year, forcing them to use up all the energy they have stored in their roots. This eventually weakens and kills these plants, allowing room for native plants to grow. It also opens up the understory, allowing us to maintain the habitat with prescribed fire.

Do they do any damage?

We limit prescribed grazing to areas where brush is very dense, and there is currently little native plant diversity. Native plants that do remain in these areas are often very common and will recover if the goats decide to have a special treat, like black-eyed Susan or white snakeroot. Once the goats clear out an area, we follow up by sowing native seed and planting native plants.

Where do the goats come from?

Parks rents the goats from a local herder who hires them out for land management purposes. They live on their farm when they are not out grazing, like during the winter.

How are the goats confined?

They are confined through the use of temporary low-voltage electric fencing.

What happens if a person touches the electric fence?

The person will receive a shock of electricity, which will be uncomfortable but not dangerous.

Who is watching the goats?

Parks staff and volunteers check on the goats daily to inspect the fence, make sure the animals seem healthy, and refill water as needed. If you would like to help, please call 608-267-4918.