# Grass-Fed Beef Initiative Extension Series

*Fact Sheet 9 of 11*

## Calving Season for Grass Finished Beef in Nova Scotia

The decision to calve during a particular season is influenced by many factors and should be made based on each farm's resources, conditions and opportunities. Consideration should be given to the availability of labour, handling facilities, barn space, and market, as well as the quality and quantity of forage and any management constraints. Regardless of the selected calving period on a farm, the objective should be to have maximum supervision of the cattle and minimum intervention. Records should be rigorously maintained with regard to calving intervention, mothering ability, cow temperament, and birth weight. This information should be considered when culling cows and selecting replacement heifers, with the goal of reducing the need to intervene at calving and managing a cow herd that has exceptional mothering ability.

### Winter Calving

Winter calving is practised on many farms. The biggest challenge it presents is keeping the calves alive in cold weather. This usually requires a reasonably good barn. In Nova Scotia we are also often challenged by a mid-winter thaw, accompanied by rain, freezing rain and mud. None of these conditions is conducive to comfortable conditions for outside calving. Barn housing the cattle and calves also presents the possibility of increased exposure to both scours and pneumonia, particularly in calves.

For winter calving, cows must be fed forage that is adequate to support lactation and calf growth. This is quite practical and some body condition loss can be expected and is reasonable. Having said that, you need to make sure that body condition is restored before breeding to ensure good conception rates and prompt breeding; this way the calving period will be tight in the subsequent calving season.

There are producers who successfully manage calving outside in the winter; this requires close supervision and some form of housing adequate to get the cow and calf out of the weather in the event of foul weather or the need to intervene.

Winter calving in an intensive situation, such as a barn or small yard, makes AI (artificial insemination) easier since the cattle will be ready to rebreed before they go to pasture.

### Spring and Summer Calving

Late spring or summer calving on pasture has been shown to have several advantages over winter calving in several North American trials, including a long-term trial at the New Liskeard Agriculture Research Station in northern Ontario). This research found that pasture calving resulted in fewer interventions during calving and a reduced number of sick calves, with fewer calves treated.

The reduced number of assisted calvings was attributed to less supervision, and as a result, less temptation to intervene, and the assumption that the cows got more exercise and were in better condition to calve. The reduction in sickness was attributed to the fact that the cows were more likely to calve on clean ground than in manure, which is more likely to house disease. These assumptions were supported by the fact that the calves had similar survival rates and weaning weights.

Pasture calving resulted in reduced feed, bedding and labour costs, with little, if any, reduction in saleable pounds of beef. These savings could be significantly increased by extending the grazing season into the late fall and early winter with stock-piled pasture.

This work seems to support the use of pasture calving in the late spring or early summer, which mimics. Spring and early summer pasture calving mimics what happens in nature, with undulates giving birth when good grazing is available to support lactation and the growth of the young.

## Fall Calving

Fall calving and weaning before pasture turn-out in the spring is practiced by some producers. They find they have the advantages of pasture and large areas to calve on, weather that is still warm, while avoiding the cold of winter, and few flies, which helps with calf health.

The disadvantage is that cows require better quality feed in the winter to ensure that calves have an adequate milk supply. There will also be higher feed requirements for additional feed for the calves. The major advantage of this practice, of course, is that calves are available for market at a time when there might be greater market opportunities. For example, weaned calves would be available at spring turnout for sale on a typically lucrative market. If they were retained they would finish at a later date than traditional calving period calves, spreading the availability of finished cattle out.

Calves from both winter and summer calvings must be fed during the winter as weaned calves, if you decide to finish them as grass-fed beef. To ensure that the yearlings continue to grow consistently until harvest, they will require high quality forage, good winter management, and exceptional pasture management to ensure that the yearlings continue to grow consistently until harvest.

Regardless of what calving period you choose, it should be carefully considered and match the resources available on the farm. The decision to calve at a specific time should also be made with the market opportunities in mind. Are there markets available at specific times of the year that will generate a greater return and can you capitalize on these by calving at a specific time of the year?

## For more information

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**Bibliography**

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