

Fence Rows and Gut Health: A Macro Look at Microflora

Written by Edwin Shank

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The similarities between diverse ecologies never cease to amaze me. One area of life may seem to be totally unrelated to the next, but upon reflection, we notice that an extremely simple truth connects the two. Observing and understanding the simple and visible helps us grasp the complex and obscure. So it is with fence rows and gut health.

I recall with some chagrin my days as a young farmer in the early 90s. My wife, Dawn, and I took over the farm from my parents immediately upon returning from our wedding trip in August of 1990, and as a still wet-behind-the-ears 20-year-old, I naturally looked to those older and more educated for answers. Agricultural university experts, extension agents and the always helpful Monsanto reps seemed like trustworthy sources of information and advice. Since they all agreed, there seemed to be no need to look further.

And in relation to fence-row management, they did all agree. It was all about achieving the most perfect kill. Monsanto's patented glyphosate herbicide Roundup was the most effective killing agent to be had. No grass or weeds were too tough. Roundup would kill everything— which was great, because vegetation, especially thistles growing on the fence line, was the enemy. They were “pathogenic” plants, and had to be eradicated. This was progress! We were defeating the enemy through anti-vegetation technology. And the fence rows became vegetation-free zones, just as we wanted them.

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At least at first they were just as we wanted them... until we began to notice a disturbing trend. Where we once had an occasional thistle on the fence row (meaning it overgrew the fence and shot out the current, we now had a major problem. All around the farm, thistles were becoming more problematic as the years went by. There were some sections of fence line where thistles had pretty much taken over. We would spray them and they would dutifully die, but in a few months, the fence row would be full of thistles again and it was time for another go-around.

Here is what was happening: The Roundup was doing its job. It was killing everything. For a few weeks after a line of spots, there would be a 3-foot wide swath of vegetation-free soil directly under the fence. And this time, competition-free ground is exactly what thistles need to really take over.

Opportunistic Results
Thistles do not compete with other plants. They are opportunistic plants which thrive in the absence of beneficial plants like grass, dandelion and clover. They love bare ground. If you have ever noticed how vacant lots and construction zones so often erupt into a spouting thistle bloom, you know what I mean.

While we meant well (who can fault thistle killers?), we were inadvertently preparing the perfect seed bed for a real thistle push. What a tragedy that we were misguided to miss such an observable truth for so long. Thistle seeds floating on the warm summer air were delighted to find a weak one out of lawn, competition-free soil already prepared for them. I'm sure they were laughing up their leaves.

Which is what we did when we woke up one morning and saw the fertility of this management by killing paradigm. Instead, the wake-up call came much more slowly and in a roundabout way. As our family became increasingly frustrated with this and other aspects of our then high-intensity conventional farming, we knew there had to be a better way. We decided to step out in faith and convert the farm to an organic farm. Even while doing this, one of our biggest fears was how to control the thistles on the fence rows without the aid of herbicides. We were sure they would be a major problem. We earnestly prepared ourselves for weeks of string trimmer work on the fence rows.

Here is what actually happened: When we stopped spraying, the grass and other native vegetation, including thistles, filled in the bare ground along the fence. No surprise there. The first year we did do a lot of string trimming, but as the second and third years rolled around, the grass, clover and other beneficial plants began to grow with a renewed boldness... and the thistle population, almost as if by magic, began to die off. The more we encouraged and supported the beneficial plants, the less problematic the pathogenic plants were. And it was not because there were fewer thistle seeds in the environment.

The realization came out of the blue. Thistles just cannot survive in any great number where the beneficial plants are healthy and strong. It was like a light bulb came on in my mind. I might have shouted, "Eureka!" It's exactly like a healthy gut! Thistles are like pathogenic bacteria. The opportunistic, pathogenic microbes just do not have a chance to proliferate when your gut is populated with beneficial probiotic microflora.

Populate Your Gut
Right over this time I was studying a bit about the amazing, almost instantaneous immunity-boosting power of raw milk and yogurt. I especially enjoyed to research the concept of competitive exclusion. I realized with a smile and renewed understanding that I had observed, in my humble fence row, the amazing process of competitive exclusion that happens invisibly in our gut when we make sure it is populated naturally with powerful probiotics.

But I am sympathetic. Because of my fence row learning experience, I can see how easy it is for worried moms and dads to fall into the Monsanto-like pharmaceutical mindset of killing bacteria as the perfect solution to illness. It seems to make so much sense. Who can fault thistle killers?

Many well-meaning people have concluded that bacteria are the enemy and so have set out to kill them of all costs. They sterilize themselves and their environment. "Kill all the bacteria!" they cry. "Right back!" They buy Probiol, and put a dispenser in every room. They get antibacterial soap, and use antibiotics for every sniffle. They go down to milk and almonds, and suffer empurated ribs, as well as raw milk and raw milk cheeses. These foods may contain pathogenic

There is only one problem with these bacteriocidal actions and reactions. In spite of their best attempts, in spite of increased food safety regulations, these people will someday find that a stray bacterium has penetrated their sterile bubble – and then artificially protected, fragile immune systems will have no defense against it.

It's already happening. Just go online to Food Safety News (FoodSafetyNews.com) and search. People are falling ill from pathogenic illness in alarming numbers and from increasingly unorthodox sources. Here is just a go-to sampling from March, 2010:

Eggs	78 sick, 2 dead, salmonella, from a bakery in Rhode Island
Kaziruts	7 sick, E. coli O157:H7
Wafnuts	12 sick, E. coli O157:H7
Pancakes	8 sick, salmonella from a church breakfast in Thurmont, Maryland
Pot legs	217 sick, salmonella

Folk, this is not normal. I don't know how to say it strongly enough. This is a powerful wake-up call of immune suppression in America. This is a symptom of a gut that is the bare ground seed bed under the fence line just waiting for the opportunistic thistle seeds. This is a symptom of a food safety program and a healthcare program that are focused on killing all bacteria – pasteurizing, sterilizing and irradiating the food supply rather than feeding and seeding probiotic bacteria in the gut.

We never will be able to eliminate all pathogens or thistle seeds from our environment. It is a delusion and an exercise in futility. But we can work to make sure that when the thistle lands in our fence rows, or the pathogen in our gut, that they find a protective blanket of health, thriving, bio-diverse flora and microflora that makes it impossible for them to proliferate.

Think about it! 🍌



Edwin Shank is a grass farmer, organic, dairy and chicken farmer. He and his family go beyond simply organic to farm with a deliberate attempt to recreate and imitate the ecosystem as God designed it. An Edible after noon, "When we taste God's likes, His plan and His design, and just respect it and work with it, why should we be surprised that the food is a taste of heaven?" Visit Edwin and the farm at www.familyone.com. View article resources and author information here: pathwaysinfo.com/resources.org/preferences.html

THE DISCLOSURE STATEMENT I don't think it is an organic dairy and chicken farmer, or a health professional, if it is a medical system you seek. As it seems, not a doctor. The information is needed to challenge, or even promote, you to explore beyond the conventional medical health system. Please note any statements or claims about the positive health benefits contained in my posts have not been evaluated by the Food & Drug Administration and are not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.



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