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Azolla: The Green Gold of Livestock Nutrition and Sustainable Farming

Hrishikesh Tekade and *Sunita Lanje

PhD Scholar, ICAR- Indian Veterinary Research Institute, Izatnagar, Bareilly.
Uttar Pradesh, India

*Corresponding Author's email: sunitalanje441@gmail.com

With the continuous rise in commercial feed prices, identifying alternative, high-quality, and cost-effective fodder options is essential for profitable livestock production. Azolla, a free-floating freshwater fern, forms a unique symbiotic association with the nitrogen-fixing cyanobacterium *Anabaena azollae*, enabling rapid biomass production without requiring synthetic nitrogen fertilizers. Rich in crude protein (19–30% DM), essential minerals, vitamins, and amino acids (particularly lysine), Azolla serves as a high-value nutrient supplement. This article reviews the biological features, chemical composition, cultivation practices, animal-specific feeding guidelines, and limitations associated with Azolla production. When integrated into livestock diets, Azolla enhances weight gain, milk production, and feed efficiency in cattle, small ruminants, swine, poultry, and rabbits.

Introduction

Feed costs constitute up to 70% of total operational expenses in animal husbandry. Securing sustainable and affordable alternatives to conventional protein sources, such as soybean meal or commercial concentrates, remains a major priority for modern agriculture. Azolla—commonly known as mosquito fern, water fern, or fairy moss—belongs to the genus of seven species of small, free-floating aquatic ferns within the family Salviniaceae. It naturally grows in stagnant freshwater bodies across tropical and subtropical regions. Azolla stands out as one of the fastest-growing aquatic plants worldwide, capable of doubling its biomass in just 8 to 10 days under favorable conditions. Its primary metabolic advantage stems from an endosymbiotic relationship with the cyanobacterium *Anabaena azollae*, which resides within specialized leaf cavities and fixes atmospheric nitrogen directly for the fern's consumption. Historically used as a green manure and biofertilizer, Azolla has emerged as a high-protein feed supplement that supports integrated farming systems.

Chemical Composition and Nutritional Value

The nutritional profile of Azolla makes it a strong alternative to traditional oil cakes and commercial concentrates. Its low lignin content ensures high digestibility across multiple livestock species.

Component	Approximate Range (% Dry Matter)	Key Nutritional Profile
Crude Protein (CP)	19–30% (typically 25–30% for <i>A. pinnata</i>)	High digestibility; balanced amino acid profile; rich in lysine.
Minerals / Ash	10–20%	Rich in Calcium, Phosphorus, Potassium, Iron, Copper, and Magnesium.
Crude Fiber (CF)	~12–15%	Low lignin content enhances overall organic matter digestibility.
Ether Extract (Fat)	3–4%	Low oil content.
Vitamins	High concentration	Rich in Vitamin A precursor (Beta-Carotene) and Vitamin B12.

Environmental Requirements for Cultivation

Optimal biomass production requires controlling key environmental parameters:

Water & Depth: Requires standing water maintaining a depth of 5–12 cm. A continuous supply of fresh, clean water is essential.

Temperature: Ideal growth occurs between 18°C and 28°C. Growth slows dramatically above 35°C, and exposure to prolonged temperatures exceeding 45°C causes plant death.

Light: Prefers partial shade (~30–50% sunlight). Excessive direct sunlight causes fronds to turn reddish-brown, while deep shade severely inhibits photosynthesis.

pH & Humidity: Thrives at a pH range of 5.2–5.8 (tolerates 3.5–10) and relative humidity between 85% and 90%.

Nutritional Requirements: Needs a regular phosphorus supply (e.g., single superphosphate) for optimal growth; added nitrogen fertilizer is unnecessary due to *Anabaena azollae* activity.

Cultivation Method and Yield Productivity

Cultivating Azolla on-farm is straightforward and requires low capital investment:

1. Site Selection: Choose a shaded, swampy area or level ground near a reliable water source.

2. Trough Preparation: Excavate a pit (e.g., 2 m × 1 m × 0.2 m) and clear out roots, stones, and debris. Ensure the base is level to maintain an even water depth.

3. Lining: Line the pit with a durable High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE) silpauline sheet (minimum 700 GSM) to prevent water seepage and root penetration.

4. Base Layer Preparation: Lay 10–15 cm of fertile soil over the sheet. Mix in a small quantity of fresh cow dung slurry and 30 g of single superphosphate.

5. Watering & Inoculation: Fill the pit with clean, potable water to a depth of 15 cm. Inoculate the water surface with 0.5–1 kg of fresh, pure Azolla culture.

6. Harvesting: Rapid growth allows daily harvesting after 7 days. Ponds yield approximately 120 g/m²/day (1–4.5 kg/m²/month). Yields up to 2.78 tons of Dry Matter per hectare have been recorded in India.

Animal-Specific Feeding Applications

Cattle and Buffalo: Fresh Azolla (specifically *A. microphylla*) can be fed at 1.5–2 kg/day per head or replace up to 25% of concentrate protein. Studies show this substitution yields a 7–21% increase in milk production and improves overall feed conversion efficiency.

Sheep and Goats: Can replace conventional oil cakes (e.g., mustard cake) at rates up to 20% for kids, 25% for lambs, and 15% for adult goats without negatively impacting growth rates.

Pigs: Azolla can replace soybean protein at 10% during the growing phase and 20% during the finishing phase. Performance rates follow the order of 10% > 20% > 0% > 30% inclusion, as higher inclusions increase fiber content and lower digestibility.

Poultry & Waterfowl: Azolla meal can be added at 5% in broiler rations and up to 10% in pullet chick feeds without affecting growth. High Beta-carotene content enhances yolk pigmentation. Ducks accept fresh Azolla up to 200 g/duck/day.

Rabbits: In New Zealand White rabbits, a 10% inclusion level of Azolla meal provides optimum weight gain and feed conversion. Young rabbits can accept up to 360–400 g/day of fresh Azolla without digestive distress.

Limitations and Challenges

Despite its benefits, several factors constrain widespread adoption:

Labor Requirements: Daily maintenance, harvesting, and washing require continuous labor.

Extension and Awareness Gaps: Limited extension programs leave many smallholder farmers unfamiliar with proper cultivation techniques.

Yield Fluctuations: Biomass production drops during extreme summer heat (>35°C) or winter cold snaps.

Risk of Contamination: Unmanaged open ponds can harbor pathogenic microflora or become breeding grounds for weeds if unmaintained.

Supply Chain Constraints: Fresh Azolla has a short shelf life and spoils rapidly without processing or drying facilities.

Conclusion

Azolla provides a sustainable, high-protein fodder option that helps lower livestock feed expenses. Its high crude protein content, rapid growth rate, simple cultivation methods, and biofertilizing capacity make it a practical resource for integrated farming systems. Broader adoption will depend on training livestock farmers, establishing low-cost drying and processing methods, and selecting climate-resilient strains.

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