

BOOST YOUR SAVINGS ACCOUNT THIS FALL

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I have a hot tip for you. I know a savings account that you can invest in that has relatively low risk and a great return. In fact, this savings account is likely to return double-digit percentages on your investment just about every year. Interested? No, I'm not talking about a special bank or some special CD. I'm talking about a fall savings account of stockpiled forage.

What is Stockpiling?

Stockpiling forage is the term used to describe the process of accumulating forage in one period of time and waiting to graze it until another time of year. Another way of thinking about it is that it is a standing hay crop. It is cut and allowed to regrow, but instead of making a last hay cutting, it is grazed.

Producers in North Georgia (Piedmont and Mountains) can stockpile tall fescue. Producers in South Georgia (south of the Fall Line and into the Coastal Plain) can stockpile bermudagrass. Other forage species can be stockpiled, as well. However, most other forage species either do not grow well in the fall (e.g., summer annuals, orchardgrass, etc.) or deteriorate too quickly after a frost or adverse weather (e.g., bahiagrass, summer annuals, orchardgrass, etc.). Tall fescue and some varieties of bermudagrass can hold their quality well into the fall and winter.

Is it Cheaper to Stockpile?

Producing and/or purchasing hay to feed livestock through the winter represents a substantial expense. Currently, most producers will have between \$90 and \$120 of total costs per ton in their hay crop. By the time one accounts for all the losses that occur between the field and the time it enters the mouth of the animal, feeding hay may cost as much as \$200 per ton of consumed forage (\$0.100 per lb)! Stockpiling can beat that.

It is nearly always cheaper to graze than to feed. Most Georgia Cattlemen know this quite well. In fact, many pastures will be overseeded in the fall so that we can extend the grazing season and reduce the amount of hay that is fed. Planting winter annuals has become a lot more common and is highly recommended. However, it is not cheap to plant winter annuals. In most years in Georgia, tall fescue and bermudagrass can be stockpiled and grazed for less than \$50/acre (Fig. 1). According to budgets put together by Dr. Curt Lacy, the cost of stockpiling is approximately ¼ the cost of overseeding with winter annuals. Of course, this cost per acre has to be divided by the yield that is produced to determine the unit cost (\$ per lb of forage). Stockpiling tall fescue and bermudagrass can produce 1500 to 3500 lbs of dry matter (DM) per acre during the late summer or early fall (\$0.014-\$0.033 per lb of forage), whereas annual ryegrass should produce 6,500-11,000 lbs of DM per acre (\$0.020-\$0.035 per lb of forage). Additionally, one must consider when this forage is available. In most parts of

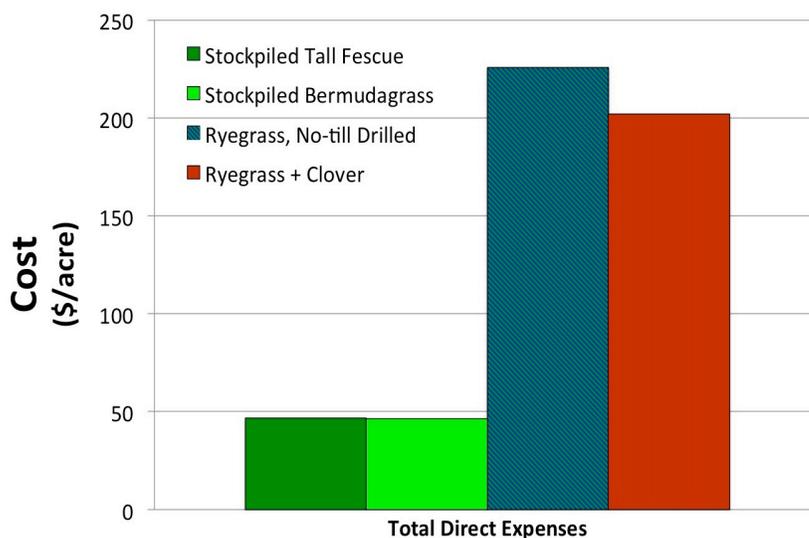


Fig. 1. The total cost per acre of stockpiled tall fescue or bermudagrass compared to no-till drilled ryegrass or ryegrass + clover overseeded into a pasture or hayfield.

Georgia, forage available on December 1 is more valuable to the producer than forage available on April 1. This is because standing forage is scarce in early December, but we often have an abundance on April Fool's Day. In this sense, stockpiled tall fescue or bermudagrass can provide cost-effective feed in the fall and early winter, when it is needed the most.

How Good is the Quality?

For most beef cattle producers in Georgia, the biggest challenge they have is providing quality for lactating cows. Stockpiled tall fescue and bermudagrass generally begin with total digestible nutrients (TDN) and crude protein (CP) values that are more than sufficient for lactating beef cows (more than 62% TDN and 11% CP; Fig. 2). In general, both forage species will sustain these levels through at least December in most years, assuming ice, snow, or driving rain does not mat the forage down. The CP content of stockpiled tall fescue stays above these critical levels throughout the winter, and its TDN levels usually stay above 62% into February or beyond. It is more of a challenge for bermudagrass to sustain these high levels, but in most years it can normally provide TDN and CP sufficient for lactating cows through early December. Even though it may not be ideal for lactating cows, stockpiled bermudagrass can usually sustain TDN and CP levels sufficient for late gestation dry cows (more than 48% TDN and 7.5% CP) well into December. By strategically using stockpiled bermudagrass, a spring-calving beef herd can eliminate hay feeding in the fall months providing enough time for the winter annuals to become available.

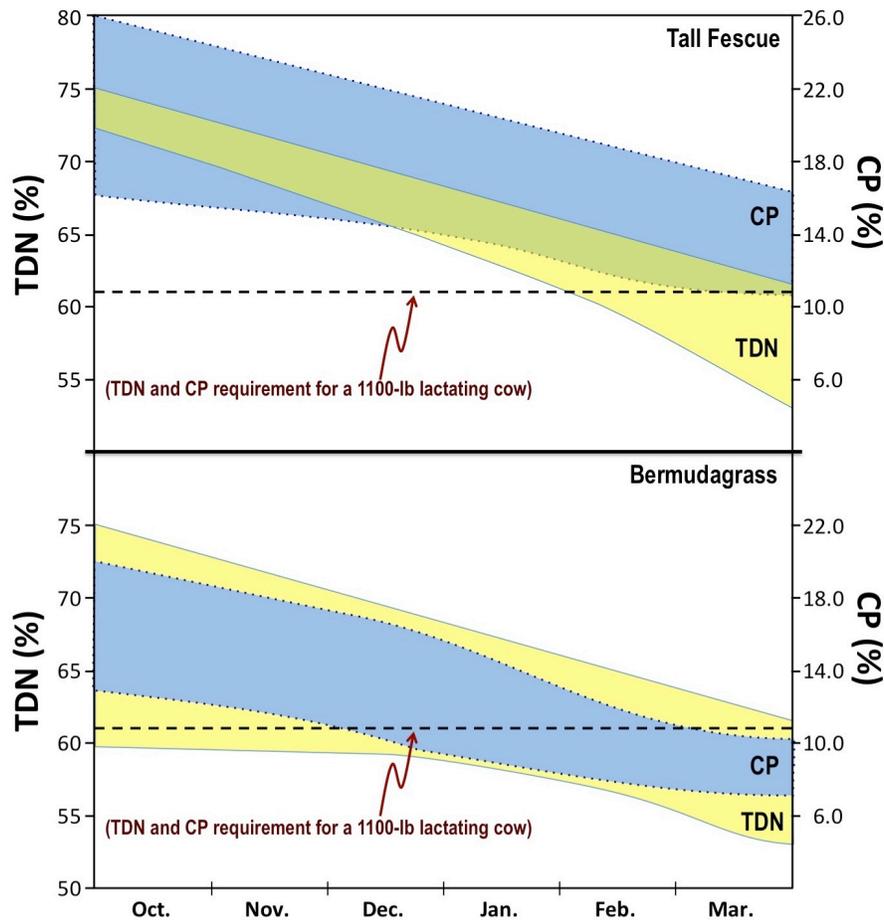


Fig. 2. The crude protein (CP) and total digestible nutrients (TDN) of tall fescue (top) are sufficient to meet the requirements of lactating beef cows throughout the fall and winter in most years. Though bermudagrass quality falls off quickly in December, it is usually sufficient to carry dry cows and late lactation cows with minimal supplementation until winter annuals reach a grazeable size. Figures adapted for Georgia conditions from forage quality data from Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Georgia.

It is worth emphasizing that stockpiled forage is NOT merely whatever the cows didn't eat the last time they were through the area. Just like a hay crop, stockpiled forage has to be clipped back to 2 – 3 inches. This “resets” the crop, encouraging new growth. If there is no new growth, the forage quality will be poor and the animals will refuse it.

How is Forage Stockpiled and Then Utilized?

The following steps will help you to successfully stockpile tall fescue or bermudagrass. First, graze or take a hay cutting so that the forage is clipped back to 2 – 3 inches. For tall fescue, this should be done in early to mid-September. Aim to do this on Labor Day weekend or thereabouts. For bermudagrass, this clipping should be done about 6 – 8 weeks prior to the first anticipated frost. The next step is to add N fertilizer as if you are making a hay cutting. Plan on applying 40 – 60 lbs of N per acre for stockpiling tall fescue and 50 – 75 lbs of N per acre for stockpiling bermudagrass. The third step is to wait. The idea is to wait to graze the stockpiled tall fescue until after Thanksgiving. Stockpiled bermudagrass should be left ungrazed until just before or after the first killing frost.

Just before grazing of the stockpiled forage is to begin, take time to measure the amount of stockpiled forage that is available. Use a grazing stick to measure the height of the stockpiled forage. In general, there should be about 250 – 300 lbs of DM per acre for every inch of stockpiled tall fescue and 300 – 400 lbs of DM per acre for every inch of stockpiled bermudagrass. It is also a good idea to take samples for a forage analysis at this time to determine if there is any need to provide supplemental energy or protein.

Once you've decided to commence grazing of the stockpiled forage, be sure to ration out the forage. It is best to only allocate small strips that provide no more than 2 to 3 days worth of grazing at a time. To do this, start near the water source and stretch a single hot wire as a front fence. After the animals have cleaned up the majority of the forage, move the hot wire back to allow them to access another 2 to 3 days worth. Doing a little math using the amount of the standing forage and the size of strip, allocate around 35 to 40 lbs of stockpiled forage per day for each 1200-lb cow. When stripping off the forage in this way, there is no need for a back fence. This is a technique called “frontal grazing” where the grazing herd works away from the water source, marching across a field like the front of an advancing army. In addition to the water source, be sure to provide plenty of access to mineral, ionophore, and supplement as needed.

More Details

For more information on stockpiling, visit the UGA Extension's Forages website, www.georgiaforages.com. There you'll find a link to the Extension Circular entitled “Stockpiling Tall Fescue for Fall and Winter Grazing” (<http://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.cfm?number=C920>) and a Fact Sheet entitled “Stockpiling Bermudagrass for Fall Grazing” (<http://www.caes.uga.edu/commodities/fieldcrops/forages/questions/042FAQ-stockpilebermuda.pdf>). If you have additional forage management questions, visit or contact your local University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office by dialing 1-800-ASK-UGA1.