

Grazing In Winter

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Some people talk about year-around pasture for cows and calves in our part of the USA. Once in a great while we have a wet autumn and a mild winter so grazing is pretty good, but most of the time we've got to depend on hay bales and protein supplements. This year, September and October rains were generally good over the entire state so we got off to a good start with small grains in south Georgia while the northern part of the state had splendid tall fescue growth. Clovers are growing off well so we have the potential for a good season.

With good supplies of pasture, we now have the problem of how best to utilize it in winter. Good grazing management can help extend our pasture supplies and reduce feeding costs.

In south Georgia where bermudagrass and bahiagrass are the base pastures, these grasses go dormant so frost and rain reduce quality in late autumn and winter. Maintaining cows on dead forage of these frosted grasses in winter will require supplemental feeding and especially protein. Protein levels of this dead grass are extremely low and will require supplementation for good cow performance. Some livestock producers plant

rye or wheat for grazing in winter. However, maintaining beef cows continuously on small grain pasture is wasteful and expensive. Protein content and digestibility of this forage are much higher than needed by a beef cow.

One approach to utilizing old dead bermuda or bahia is to maintain the brood cow herd on it and limit grazing for several hours every 2 to 3 days on rye or wheat pasture. Small grain pastures are planted early on prepared land and are ready to graze by November or December.

Grazing cows on this high-quality pasture for a short time supplies the protein needs of the animals. Limited grazing of the small grain pasture rations this forage and prevents waste and trampling damage during wet winter weather. Producers find that moving the cattle to adjacent pastures is easy as animals soon become accustomed to it. Beef cows and calves being moved from rye pasture to frosted bermudagrass pasture in winter. Limited grazing for a few hours each week on the high quality pasture conserves forage and maintains good animal condition.

In wet autumns such as this year, tall fescue pastures in north Georgia will

accumulate large supplies of surplus forage. Conserving it as hay is difficult as cool moist weather makes drying very slow. Obviously, this surplus forage can be grazed into the winter, providing "hay on the root" or stockpiled grazing. However, turning cows into large pastures containing heavy tall fescue growth ready for a hay cut will result in large amounts of wasted forage.

Dividing tall fescue pastures with large amounts of forage into small areas or strips using movable electric polywire fencing will ration the grazing and prevent animals from trampling down and wasting grass. Using this method can provide grazing through much of the winter with only minimal hay feeding when good autumn growth is obtained. Nutritive quality of this accumulated tall fescue forage is good and much higher than for dormant warmer season grasses such as bermuda or bahia. Quality of this forage will deteriorate during the winter, but it is normally adequate for dry beef cows until they calve.

Rationing forage to beef cows is a way to make pastures go further and reduce supplemental feeding in winter. May the winter treat your forage kindly and your cows respond accordingly!

