

Cow Feed For Winter

By Carl S. Hoveland, Crop and Soil Science Dept., Univ. of Georgia

Drought has been tough on cattle producers in many parts of Georgia this year. Hay yields have been low and drought-stricken pastures have resulted in feeding of limited supplies of hay. Unless rainfall improves greatly in late summer, hay supplies will be short on many farms. Several producers have already told me that they plan to do more sod seeding to get winter pasture. Planning ahead can provide adequate feed supplies for winter.

Some Tips for Successful Sodseeding

Sodseeding is simply drilling winter annuals such as rye, wheat, oats, or ryegrass in bermudagrass or bahiagrass sods to provide grazing during winter and spring when the summer grasses are dormant and unproductive. Sodseeding will not provide autumn grazing so if early pasture is needed, then the winter annuals should be planted on prepared land. Obtaining stands of winter annuals on sod is not difficult if rainfall is adequate and care is taken to follow a few basic rules.

(1) Fields selected for sodseeding should be well drained and not subject to flooding.

(2) Soil test and apply phosphorus and potassium as needed. Grass sods are often short of these nutrients, especially if several cuts of hay have been removed. Nitrogen at the rate of 60 lb/acre should be applied at planting and an additional 60 lb/acre in February.

(3) Winter annuals must be planted later in sod than on prepared land. If winter annuals are planted on sod too early, the summer grass will continue to grow and compete with the new seedlings. Generally, safe dates for planting on summer grass sods are: north Georgia - Oct 1-15; central Georgia - Oct 15-30; and south Georgia - November 1-15. Earlier planting can be done if the sod is thoroughly disked or where Gramoxone (paraquat) herbicide is sprayed on the sod at 1 to 1.5 pints/acre to provide an "early frost" effect.

(4) If drought has persisted over much of the summer, grass residue will not be a problem. However, if considerable residue exists it can cause seeding failures. Residue can be removed by close grazing or mowing before planting.

(5) Planting is ideally done with a sod seeder since it can penetrate a dense sod like bahiagrass. Grain drills can be used on bermudagrass sods if moisture is adequate for penetration of the soil. Rye, wheat, or oats should be seeded at 60-90 lb/acre at a depth of 1 to 2 inches. Ryegrass seed should be planted at 15-20 lb/acre and can germinate on the soil surface if in direct contact with the soil but best results are obtained by planting at a depth of .25-.50 inch. Rye, wheat, or oats will provide the earliest grazing and make more winter growth than ryegrass. Ryegrass will continue growing into late spring after the small grains have stopped growth.

Managing Tall Fescue

In the northern part of Georgia where tall fescue is the dominant grass, different approaches are needed than in the southern part of the state where summer grasses are the main pasture crop.

(1) The first thing to do is determine the condition of your tall fescue pastures. Has drought and overgrazing damaged stands? If stands are satisfactory, be generous with fertilizer to give the grass a good boost. Be sure to get the nitrogen on early (September) to take advantage of rains that often come during that

month. If we get some good fall rains, you have the potential of getting good grazing then or it can be stockpiled for winter use. Some years, it is possible to get a good cutting of hay in October. If tall fescue stands are nearly gone, replanting will be necessary (can be done with a sod seeder) to restore productivity next year. Unfortunately, this will do nothing to provide needed grazing during winter and next spring.

(2) Rye or wheat planted on prepared land can provide grazing during November and December and again in February and March. However, to do this it is essential to plant early in September and get rapid establishment. Late planting will result in no fall grazing. Small grain pasture is expensive for beef cows but it may be practical when combined with low quality hay or poultry litter (mixed with 20% corn). Where poultry litter is available, it offers excellent potential for low cost roughage during winter.

Drought and hay shortages are not a pleasant prospect. However, planning for alternative pastures during winter can alleviate much of the problem and it may be cheaper than purchasing expensive hay. Good planning at this time can make your winter feed program much easier.

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