

Stockering Cattle on Tall Fescue

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Beef calf prices are lower than in past years and will probably remain that way for several years because of the buildup in cow herds. Because of this, it may be worth considering keeping calves and carrying them to heavier weights on pasture and sell as feeder cattle. In south Georgia, the answer is easy - rye or wheat pasture on prepared land. In central and north Georgia, there is another option that should be considered - endophyte-free tall fescue. Tall fescue is a perennial so the pasture will remain for many years and thus saves the cost of replanting each year as is the case with rye or wheat, it has the potential for more fall growth, and as a perennial grass it covers the land and reduces soil erosion. On the other hand, tall fescue will not yield as much mid-winter growth as rye or wheat and if it is infected with the fungal endophyte the gains will be poor.

Let us look at some results of a steer grazing study at the Central Georgia Station, Eatonton that Mark McCann, Vaughn Calvert, Nick Hill, and I have had for the past two years:

	Endophyte-free fescue		Infected fescue		
	Year	Low GP	High GP	Low GP	High GP
Steers/acre	1994	1.75	2.30	2.10	2.60
Avg. daily gain, lb.	1993	2.30	2.16	1.01	0.40
	1994	2.50	2.10	0.88	1.02
Gain/acre, lb.	1993	228	332	122	78
	1994	373	481	161	226

In each year the grazing period was 85 days during winter-spring, utilizing both high and low grazing pressures (GP) based on forage available. Drought during the spring of 1993 sharply reduced the stocking rate in late spring. It is obvious from these results that endophyte infected tall fescue is **not** suitable for stocker cattle grazing as daily gains are extremely low. In contrast, endophyte-free tall fescue averaged over 2 pounds per day regardless of grazing pressure and 332 to 481 pounds gain/acre. This is relatively cheap gain over a short period of time. In addition, an endophyte-free tall fescue pasture can supply good animal gains in the fall and into early winter plus a good cutting of hay in late spring if steers are marketed in April.

If you have a pasture of endophyte-free tall fescue available, apply phosphorus and potassium according to soil test and 60 lb N/acre in September to give fall grazing for calves weaned in late September or early October. If part of it is fenced off or if it is split into 4 or 5 paddocks for rotational grazing, then surplus can be stockpiled for grazing into January. Since growth will be limited from late December to early February, supplemental hay and protein feeding may be needed to maintain daily gains of animals at about one lb/day. When good growth of tall fescue begins again, compensatory gains will regain much of this reduced gain.

An additional 60 lb N/acre should be

applied in February to stimulate winter and spring growth. Generally, feeder calf prices peak in spring and it may be most profitable to sell calves in April rather than continue to add additional gain on good pasture. If calves are sold early, then it will pay to apply additional nitrogen to produce a good cutting of hay. If endophyte-free tall fescue is grazed in summer, it should not be grazed closely so that 3 to 4 inches of stubble remain on the plant at all times. Close continuous grazing in summer will weaken stands and reduce productivity of endophyte-free tall fescue pasture.

If you do not have any endophyte-free tall fescue and would like to use it for stockering calves, then it should be planted this fall on prepared land for use a year from now. Seed of a number of good varieties are available such as: AU Triumph, Forager, Martin, Phyter, and Penngrazer. Fertilize according to soil test results. Do not graze it during winter and early spring the first year to allow good root establishment. By the next fall you should be ready to stocker cattle with good gains at low cost for many years.

Endophyte-free tall fescue pasture is a good option for stocker cattle in central and north Georgia. It should not be planted in the Coastal Plain area of south Georgia as stands will not persist. If you are in north or central Georgia, grazing calves on endophyte-free tall fescue may be a way to get a little more out of your calves during this period of lower prices.



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