

BAHIAGRASS

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Bahiagrass is often considered a second-class grass because it doesn't make the spectacular high yields of hybrid bermudagrass and is generally lower quality. However, there are a lot of beef cattle producers in the Coastal Plain that depend on this grass and are satisfied with its performance. Bahiagrass covers Florida and a large share of pastures in south Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. There must be something good about this grass to make it so popular.

Origin and adaptation

Common bahiagrass was introduced to Florida in 1913 and was widely planted in Florida but often winterkilled further north. Pensacola bahiagrass, the most common variety, was found growing on vacant areas near the docks in Pensacola, Florida in 1935 by E.H. Finlayson, a county agent. This more cold hardy variety probably originated in southern Brazil, and is today the most widely grown variety. Pensacola bahiagrass has so many outstanding characteristics: tolerant of acid soil, low fertility, drought, poor drainage, and close continuous grazing. Bahiagrass can be grown on wet soils too poorly drained for bermudagrass. In addition it is established from seed, forms a tight sod of heavy rhizomes which resist weeds, greens up earlier than bermudagrass in spring, and is relatively free from insects and diseases. In short, this is the perfect low-input grass that can furnish pasture for beef cows on poor land while being overgrazed.

Bahiagrass does have several disadvantages. Seedlings are weak and do not compete well with annual grass weeds so it may take two years to get a solid stand. Bahiagrass seed, eaten by cattle, will germinate after passage and slowly become established in hybrid bermudagrass pastures, often dominating the pasture if soil fertility is low. The dense sod makes it difficult to get stands of overseeded clovers unless the sod is tilled or drill planted.

Establishment

Plant Pensacola bahiagrass seed at 12 to 15 lb/acre in April on a prepared seedbed or no-till plant it into small grain pasture that is being grazed. Summer planted bahiagrass will generally have more weed competition problems. New plantings should be fertilized with 30 to 40 lb N/acre after seedlings have emerged and started to grow. Apply phosphorus and potassium prior to planting as indicated by soil test results. Mow or graze moderately to control annual grasses.

Pensacola bahiagrass is mainly used for grazing. Hay yields will be lower than for hybrid bermudagrass. Bahiagrass will respond to nitrogen fertilizer but not as well as bermudagrass. Pastures can be overgrazed, under-fertilized, and generally abused without losing stands. With continuous close grazing, plants grow more prostrate and produce a great deal of leaf area close to the soil surface and below the level where cattle can graze. Thus, cattle cannot completely defoliate bahiagrass so the plants continue to thrive.

Forage digestibility of bahiagrass is somewhat lower and animal gains below that of hybrid bermudagrass. Forage quality is best in early spring and declines over the summer. However, forage quality of pasture and hay is generally adequate for beef cows. Seed production continues over many months in summer.

Tifton 9 bahiagrass

This new variety was developed by Dr. Glenn Burton at the Coastal Plain Experiment Station, Tifton, GA. Compared to Pensacola bahiagrass, Tifton 9 is more vigorous, grows more upright, has longer and broader leaves, and has somewhat greater seedling vigor. Hay yields of Tifton 9 have been over 40% higher than for Pensacola.

Tifton 9 is better suited for hay than Pensacola bahiagrass and offers potential for a productive seed-planted hay crop in rotation with row crops. Since Tifton 9

grows more erect than Pensacola, a higher percentage of the leaves can be removed by close grazing. Thus, it is possible that close continuous grazing over a period of years may weaken plants and reduce productivity. It may be advisable to maintain several inches of growth on Tifton 9 pastures or allow a rest period of two to three weeks after grazing closely.

The future of bahiagrass

A lot of beef cattle producers in the Southeastern USA depend on this pasture grass that stays with them year after year with minimal care. It's a tough grass that resists cattle hooves, weeds, pests, close grazing, drought, and flooding. Some other grasses may be higher yielding and have other advantages but lack the dependability of bahiagrass for pasture. Bahiagrass has found a home and is here to stay!

STAMPEDE

By Jerry Palen



"Elmo! We made enough money this year to buy something used!"