

Five tips for winter annual forage production

John Andrae

Extension Agronomist- Forages
Department of Crop and Soil Sciences

Think about it. It is expensive to feed hay to beef cattle. First, fertilizer must be applied and the field deferred from grazing. Expensive equipment is normally purchased and maintained to cut and bale this crop. Costly fuel is required to run cutters, tedders, balers and hay forks. To add insult to injury, about 30% of hay stored outdoors is lost to weathering and animals may refuse an addition 20%. It shouldn't be surprising that winter feed costs often account for 30-40% of total beef production costs. The optimist in me views this as an advantage. Think of all the costs that can be *saved* in this area by simply minimizing hay needs. Even though the cattle market is currently high, there is still more money to be made out there.

Wouldn't it be cheaper to let animals harvest the forage? Grazing would minimize or eliminate many of the expenses listed above. Fertilizer, particularly phosphate and potash could be greatly decreased because of nutrient recycling in urine and dung. Expensive equipment could be sold and maintained by someone else. Rain allows living plants to grow and produce instead of weathering hay stores. What an opportunity! Rye, wheat, oats, and ryegrass all offer an excellent opportunity for decreasing winter hay needs. Below are five tips for efficient establishment and utilization of these forage crops.

1. Select seed carefully. Winter annual species differ in the timing of forage production. Cereal rye will produce more fall forage than the other forage types (especially in clean-tilled land) but will mature early in the spring. Annual ryegrass will perform better than other species on wet land and will produce abundant and excellent quality forage from early March through May; however, little or no fall grazing should be expected from this species. Also be sure to buy high quality seed. Paying a slightly higher price for seed with a certified germination and good disease resistance will pay big dividends later.

2. If sodseeding into bermudagrass or bahiagrass, be sure to plant into closely grazed or (even better) lightly tilled sod. Planting into short sod decreases shading, increases establishment rate and improves early season forage production. Disturbing 20-25% of the sod with a light discing should not affect long term production of bermudagrass or bahiagrass.

3. Fertilize appropriately. I'm amazed at how many producers will spend money on seed for overseeding large acreages, but will not pay for a pound of nitrogen. They are then discouraged by the lack of cool season grass production. Overseed only the acreage you are willing to fertilize and manage. Supplying adequate fertility decreases the overseeded acreage needed. Why spend money on seed and planting costs if you are not going to manage this investment for optimum production? See your local county agent for fertilization guidelines for overseeded and clean tilled cool season annual pastures.

4. *Allow plants to establish before grazing.* This is, without a doubt, one of the most frequent errors made when cool season annuals are utilized. In fact, many farms overseed bermudagrass with rye or ryegrass and never remove the cattle. Allowing plants to develop a root system will improve drought tolerance and improve forage production over the long term. Delay grazing cool season annuals until they reach 6" in height and try not to graze plants shorter than 2-3".

5. *Graze appropriately to maximize production.* Winter annual forages are most appropriate for growing cattle like stocker steers or replacement heifers; however, cows can effectively utilize these forages with some appropriate grazing management. Limit grazing is the best way to stretch winter annual forages with mature beef cows. Allowing access to the winter pasture for two hours each day will allow cows to fill up on high quality forage and will minimize trampling and wasteful consumption. If labor is unavailable for removing cattle from pasture each day, simply graze the winter annuals every other day. Supply fair quality hay when cattle are not on winter annual pasture.

Hopefully the above tips will help maximize the productivity of your winter annual pastures. I'd like to encourage all who are able to attend the upcoming statewide forage conference in Waco Georgia on November 16th. There are some excellent keynote speakers from Oklahoma, Tennessee and Georgia on the program who will cover topics from pasture aeration to rotational grazing. It will definitely be a program worth attending. For more information please contact your local county agent, district conservationist, or go to www.georgiaforages.com or www.gglcc.org. Hope to see you there.