



THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
Colleges of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences & Family and Consumer Sciences

Late Winter Plantings of Winter Annual Forages

Dr. Dennis Hancock,
Extension Forage Agronomist,
Crop and Soil Sciences Dept.,
University of Georgia,
Athens Campus

Dr. Don Ball,
Extension Agronomist/Professor,
Department of Agronomy and Soils,
Auburn University, AL

Recently a number of livestock producers have asked about making a spring (actually winter) planting of winter annuals for forage. University recommendations are to plant winter annuals in autumn. However, in late winter, many hay barns may be nearly empty, hay cost may be too high (if available to buy), winter annual acreage may be less than it would have been if the autumn planting period had been better, or the cost of alternative feeds may be high. Consequently, the idea of planting winter annuals to get even a modest forage yield may be appealing to many producers. Extension workers should not want to be perceived as “recommending” the planting of winter annuals in late winter, but if producers express interest in doing this, it makes sense to attempt to give them as much helpful information as possible.

Winter plantings of winter annuals have not been evaluated for yields in the southeastern states. However, some producers have done this before, sometimes with surprisingly good results, particularly in our southern most counties. A guess is that a producer who does the best job he/she can and who has some luck to go with their management might (the operative word here is “might”) produce as much as 1,500 pounds or more of dry matter per acre.

It should be made clear that planting winter annuals in late winter is a gamble (farming is always a gamble, but this one is more risky than usual). If a producer plants winter annuals in late winter, there is the possibility of an unseasonable blast of cold weather occurring after a warm period during which the seed germinated. The result could be death of the recently-germinated seedlings. Furthermore, in order for the seedlings to make very much growth at all, growing conditions need to be ideal or near ideal, with appropriate moisture available, plenty of sunlight, and suitable temperatures. Of course suitable soil fertility and soil pH are essential, as always, and timely application of nitrogen to a young stand will be of particular importance.

The window of opportunity for even trying this risky approach is narrow. If any such planting is to be made in southern counties (approximately below the Fall Line), it probably should be done by March 1 or so. In northern counties (Piedmont & Mountain/Valley Regions), a week or so later would be likely be the limit. Of all the winter annual grasses, an argument can be made that oats (although the most cold-sensitive small grain species) probably has the most potential for making quick late-winter/spring growth, with triticale being the second choice among the small grains.

Annual ryegrass seed is relatively inexpensive, but if a producer is going to try ryegrass in a planting at this time of year it makes sense to plant a variety known to have the potential to make growth in late spring, as opposed to an early heading type such as Gulf. Anyone who is going to make late winter plantings of either ryegrass or a small grain probably should bump the seeding rate up by at least 20%, as compared to an autumn planting. This should facilitate getting a quick stand and compensating for the lack of sufficient tillering that would normally occur in overwintering annuals. Winter annual legumes such as arrowleaf clover and crimson clover should ONLY be planted in autumn.

Seed of some varieties of ryegrass and/or small grains are often still available in late winter from some seed outlets. Price varies from dealer to dealer as would be expected, however, most dealers seek to discount their remaining stock to clear warehouses for the upcoming growing season. A partial list may be available from your state's Extension Forage Specialist. Dealers seeking to provide this seed at a discount to producers in late winter are encouraged to contact their state's Extension Forage Specialist.

Again, planting winter annuals this late in the season should be considered VERY RISKY and every consideration to alternatively feeding low-price commodities and by-products (corn, soybeans meal, cottonseed meal, etc.) should be evaluated from an economic standpoint. It is important to remember that with making a late planting of winter annuals, one should consider not only the cost of seed, but also fertilizer, fuel, and the risk involved. One should remember that by not planting in the autumn, as much as 80% of the growing season is lost. Certainly, productivity of these forages will be greatly reduced from normal expected yields.

Fact Sheet / April, 2007

The University of Georgia and Ft. Valley State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and counties of the state cooperating. The Cooperative Extension Service, the University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences offers educational programs, assistance and materials to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, age, sex or disability.

An Equal Opportunity Employer/Affirmative Action Organization Committed to a Diverse Work Force

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and the U.S. Department of Agriculture cooperating.

Dr. Scott Angle, Dean and Director