

# Beyond Hay and Cubes



There is more than one way to feed a cow herd this winter. Now is the time to start considering whether annual forages are a viable option for your operation.

by *Sharla Ishmael*

**A**hh, the miserable, muggy, interminable days of August in the South are taking their annual toll on us and our critters. While most of us won't be able to escape the heat for some time, producers have good reasons to start visualizing the cooler months ahead.

For one thing, securing enough hay for the winter may be harder than ever, depending on what part of the region you call home. With most of Texas and parts of Oklahoma, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida and Georgia still in "extreme" to "exceptional" drought conditions (according to the U.S. Drought Monitor in late May), hay may be as hard to come by as a cool breeze.

For another thing, producers with the capability of planting some type of annual forage in September to November can reduce their dependence on hay and other

purchased supplements later this coming winter. Whether overseeding into warm-season, perennial grass pastures or drilling into clean-tilled pastures, winter pastures made up of small grains, legumes or cool-season, annual grasses may be your best bet to balance forage availability with the nutritional needs of the herd.

Like so much in ranching, however, it depends on the weather, input costs, location and timing.



"With the price of fuel and fertilizer through the roof, it's a very good time to re-evaluate costs," explains Larry Redmon, state forage specialist at Texas A&M University. "Producers need to ask themselves, 'Do I live where I can plant winter pastures to decrease the hay needed and/or also use as a supplement?'"

"Some producers use winter pastures for limit-grazing, meaning they let the cattle in to graze two or three times a week (instead of feeding hay). Other producers use winter pastures to turn their cattle out in about February, during the rapid growth phase of the forage, and leave them there until spring green-up. Some producers even stockpile warm-season perennial grasses like a standing hay crop. It could be late January before you have to feed the first drop of hay," he explains.

Redmon says a recent plane trip over the Southeast showed him that more producers ought to be using winter pastures in their grazing management scheme.

"I looked down and the number of green pastures was only about 10% of the number of brown, or dormant, pastures," he says. "Either people like me have done a lousy job getting the word out, or the technology just hasn't been adopted."

## What to plant?

In the South, the most common forages planted for winter pastures are rye, ryegrass or some type of clover, depending on their region's soils, rainfall, etc. Small grains like rye, wheat and oats may require special equipment if they have to be drilled, however both the equipment and know-how can be hired. Planting annual ryegrass or clover doesn't generally require equipment most producers don't already have.

Things to consider about which type of forage to plant include timing of the plant's maturity and corresponding needs of different classes of cattle, disease resistance, palatability, drought and temperature tolerance, fertilization needs and soil quality.

"The challenges in Florida and other parts of the Southeast are the common plains soils — very sandy, characterized by low fertility and low moisture retention," explains Yoana Newman, assistant professor in the agronomy department at the University of Florida. "We have fewer legume options here, compared with South Carolina or northern Georgia, with poor soils and shorter windows of production.

"The farther south you go, the shorter that window, because the winters are milder and shorter," she says. "Still, it's worth considering your options if you are in an area where you have moisture, like in the flatwoods. Another

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problem for Florida producers is unpredictable weather. Historically, in a 10-year period, half of those years will be good for clover and the other half will be either too hot or too dry.”

However, Newman explains one of the benefits of legumes is they fix

nitrogen in the soil and are a good alternative to fertilizer. They increase forage quality and protein and are present in early spring before the warm-season grasses come back.

She has one vital tip for anyone who plants clover: Pay attention to the pH of the soil because legumes won't grow without a proper pH, and you may need to add some lime.

No matter what forage a producer plants in the pasture, Newman says disease problems can be minimized by selecting locally adapted varieties. Older varieties may have more problems. Numerous resources can help guide producers to the right varieties in their area, including the “Forages of Florida” website at <http://agronomy.ifas.ufl.edu/ForagesofFlorida/index.php>. Most state Extension agencies have similar sites with very helpful publications. You might also check with the local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) website or local office and your state land-grant university's resources.

### Avoid common mistakes

John Andrae of Clemson University says the most common mistake producers in his part of the country make is failing to apply fertilizer on overseeded and clean-tilled pastures.

“Even when an annual clover is included, you may need to apply a starter dose of fertilizer. Another mistake is to graze too early.”

Newman says jumping the gun on grazing is also common in her area. “At the first sign of green, producers want to put cattle out there to graze. Ideally, you'd let it grow to 6 inches or 8 inches before grazing. As an example, ryegrass starts out slow and then explodes. If cattle graze too early, you can stunt the plant's development and production potential.”

Other potential problems include failure to remove enough residue from your warm-season perennial pastures before overseeding. Redmon says you might want to

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consider lightly disking a pasture and, at the very least, let the cattle graze those pastures short in August-September before seeding.

Of course, the best-laid plans can fall victim to weather conditions. If you live in an area that has been dry for a while, you might proceed with extreme caution.

“When it's been dry for a long time, then you finally do get a little rain, the wind can dry that up in just a few days,” Redmon explains. “And when you have a dry soil profile, it's a real gamble. You have to start getting rain almost weekly (if you're going to plant). So many times, a producer will get just enough rain to get the seed in and germinate, then the moisture shuts off. It's a disastrous result as far as winter pasture goes.

“We rarely have an “average” year. Even in East Texas, where they get an average yearly rainfall of 35 to 50 inches, when you look at the actual records, they receive less than that 50% to 60% of the time,” Redmon says. “Drought puts a horrible wrinkle into winter pasture planning. It takes moisture to grow hay. You have to have your barn full, and the sooner the better. If you can't buy locally, then the price goes through the ceiling to ship it in. Plus, your winter pasture goes out the window. You need moisture in the soil to begin with and the additional moisture to sustain growth.”

### Have a plan

Even if hay is available and you can plant some winter pastures, Redmon advises producers to take a critical look at their stocking rates.

“A lot of people look at calf prices, but input costs have risen dramatically,” he says. “The latest information from the SPA (Standardized Performance Analysis) data show that it costs a producer, on average, \$607 to own a cow each year. And the costs of production are doing nothing but rising. Sometimes less really is more.”

Of course, that requires knowing what your specific costs are.

Would your ranch's costs be higher or lower than that average? What percent of your costs are from purchased feed? These kinds of questions can only be answered with a good set of records. And while you may be tired of hearing that you need to keep better records on everything to do with

your operation, it's the only way to make good decisions — like whether it's more cost-effective to plant winter pastures or not this year.

“Few producers have a written plan,” Redmon says. “You need to monitor your plan and look back to see if you've achieved progress towards meeting your goals or not. If you did make progress, maybe you just need to look at minor modifications. If you didn't make progress, records are a good guidepost to make changes, keep monitoring, etc. You should be constantly striving to tweak the plan.”



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