Stargrass, a Speciality Forage for Hay and Warm Season Grazing

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Stargrasses are forages which have qualities that fit special needs in a cow/calf operation. Stargrass is a close relative of bermudagrass. In south Florida, stargrasses produce considerably more forage than Bermudas, and are less susceptible to diseases such as rust. Stargrass is planted with vegetative cuttings from existing grass stands. ‘Ona’ stargrass is the older variety used throughout south Florida, but two new varieties, ‘Florona’ and ‘Florico’, are also recommended.

Stargrasses have a courser stem than Bermudas, but produce good quality hay when managed properly. The secret to making good stargrass hay is fertilization and harvesting it at a young growth stage. Applying 400 to 500 pounds per acre of 20-5-10 fertilizer to stargrass and harvesting it after about four to five weeks of good growing weather produces hay with at least 10% crude protein and 55% TDN. It is important to produce hay of this quality if intended for feeding yearling cattle and first-calf heifers. Slightly lower quality hay is acceptable for mature cows.

At the Range Cattle Station we make stargrass hay in the spring and again in the fall. Stargrass produces about 2 tons of hay per acre at each harvest. A frequent problem is an attack by army worms or loopers in late summer or early fall, requiring an application of Sevin insecticide.

Another special use of stargrass is for grazing yearling cattle from May through November. Dr. Paul Mislevy showed that stargrass pasture will carry about three yearlings steers per acre and produce about 200 pounds of total gain per yearling or a daily gain of one pound per day. We also graze stargrass pasture for two to three months between the spring and fall hay crops with good success. The important factors in grazing management of stargrass are to rotate cattle once a week among four or five pastures, and fertilize. One application of a complete fertilizer in the spring (300 pounds of a 20-5-10 per acre) and top dress with 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre midsummer and again in late summer is an economical fertilization program. Top dress with 50 pounds of nitrogen per acre if stargrass is grazed between the spring and fall hay crops.

Dr. Mislevy has studied the use of stargrass pasture and molasses slurry for growing
heifers from weaning in June until winter. Results showed that these heifers will gain slightly better than one pound a day from June to November. This is the level of performance needed to successfully breed heifers as yearlings.

A problem that prevents stargrasses from being an excellent all-around grass for cow-calf production is its susceptibility to cold weather. Once frosted, stargrass quickly loses its nutritive value and usually provides little grazing until spring. However, the excellent growth of stargrasses during our long growing season offers many opportunities for making good quality hay and excellent grazing for young cattle. Occasionally we have a frost-free winter in central Florida, and some areas in south Florida frequently go without frost. In these situations stargrasses provide good quality grazing year round.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate.