Selecting a Perennial Grass for Permanent Pastures

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By Findlay Pate

UF/IFAS, Range Cattle REC

This is the time of year when many ranchers are renovating old pastures or planting new ones. A question often asked is, ‘What is the best perennial grass to plant for my cow/calf operation?’ The answer is; there is no one grass that meets the needs for all phases of a cow/calf production system.

Bahiagrass should be the primary forage because of its dependability, even when mismanaged. It grows well with limited fertilization, 50 pounds of N/acre in late-winter or early-spring, and still maintains moderate quality. It is a good grass for smaller ranches where grazing management is difficult and a dependable grass is most important.

A disadvantage of bahiagrass is that its moderate quality is below that needed for young animals, especially weaned calves, yearling cattle, and even young cows. This is where other grasses have a valuable place. Three ‘specialty grasses' currently in use in south Florida are stargrass, 'Floralta' hemarthria, and Rhodesgrass. All three have relatively high quality when managed properly. Good management includes the use of a complete fertilizer in the spring (300 pounds of 20-5-10/acre) and two applications of N (50 pounds/acre) during the summer growth period.

Stargrass and Floralta are planted vegetatively. Stargrass produces better quality forage during the summer, but stargrass is sensitive to frost and does not provide available forage for three to four months each winter. Stargrass and Floralta produce good hay, but stargrass is easier to care and usually has better quality. Floralta hay often has a moderate to low crude protein content which could cause problems when fed to young cattle. Nitrogen fertilization is very important for Floralta.

Rhodesgrass is planted by seed, and has many of the characteristics of pangolagrass. It makes good quality hay when fertilized properly. Rhodesgrass produces some winter growth. It is a relatively new grass for south Florida and a lot is unknown about its persistence and other characteristics under commercial conditions. It has great potential and ranchers are encouraged to plant Rhodesgrass, but on a limited scale until more is known on persistence.

The important point is that all three ‘specialty grasses' can greatly compliment bahiagrass
in the cow/calf operation. They are particularly useful for growing replacement heifers and young cows, either as a grazed forage or hay. All require a relative high fertilization program compared to bahiagrass. Rotational grazing of these grasses is important, and overgrazing results in stand loss.

It should be recognized that all grasses have a niche in most ranching operations. It is the good managers who fit several grasses into their pasture system to best obtain the many production needs. It is advisable to grow two or more grasses for backup purposes, because a devastating problem can happen to one grass as is currently being experienced on many ranches with mole cricket damage to bahiagrass.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate