Spring is coming on and it is time to start thinking about planting new pastures or renovating old ones. The most widely used pasture grass in Florida is bahiagrass, and for good reasons. Bahia is very dependable and almost impossible to mismanage. Even with sever overgrazing it recovers when the stress is eased by removing cattle, better growing conditions (rain and warm weather) and fertilization. The UF/IFAS has shown that bahia needs only nitrogen fertilizer, and the most efficient rate is 60 units of N per acre, applied once in late winter or early spring. Bahia grows well at pH of 5, needing less lime than other grasses.

The only natural enemy of bahiagrass is the mole cricket. Mole cricket damage of bahiagrass pasture is spotty in most south Florida counties, but problems are widespread and severe in Hillsborough County, Polk County and especially Pasco County. Mole crickets may be a special problem when establishing new bahia pasture.

The nutritional quality of bahiagrass is 'moderately good' from April through November, providing forage with 8 to 10% crude protein and 50 to 55% TDN, which is adequate protein and energy for mature brood cows. Only during the hard winter, December through March, is the quality of bahia quality 'moderately low', containing 5 to 8% crude protein and 40 to 45% TDN. With adequate amounts of forage available for grazing and a good supplementation program, brood cows winter well on bahia pasture.

One grazing management tip is; do not carry over-grown, mature bahia pasture into the winter. Over-grown bahia will fall over and mat, providing little grazing. The mature forage available has very poor quality. Stage over-grown bahia to a 6 to 10 inch height in late summer or early fall by grazing or mowing. Although bahia withstands continuous grazing, a weekly rotation grazing system between 3 or 4 pastures is recommended.

The year-round carrying capacity of bahia pasture is variable, depending upon soil type and moisture. With nitrogen fertilization, winter supplementation (about 125 days) and hay feeding (as needed) a brood cow to 1.5 to 2 acres is usually possible, and still produce 500 pound or better calves at weaning. Without hay feeding and limited
fertilization and supplementation, 2.5 to 4 acres is needed for each brood cow.

The 'moderately good' quality of bahiagrass is a problem for young cattle, especially the first year after weaning. These cattle require forage with about 11% crude protein and 60% TDN. Without supplementation and hay feeding, yearling cattle grazing bahia pasture barely maintain their weaning weight during the first winter and spring after fall weaning. When breeding heifers at 2 years of age, some supplementation is needed such that heifers gain 1/3 to 1/2 pound per day during the first winter after weaning. If heifers are going to be grazed on bahiagrass pasture and bred as yearlings, moderate quantities of supplement and good quality hay is needed from weaning to breeding such that heifers gain about 1 pound per day. First calf heifers, either two or three years of age, grazing bahia pasture will require a good supplementation program from calving through breeding if a good breed back is expected.

Research at Ona and at Belle Glade showed that bahiagrass varieties are similar in yield and quality. Recently, Tifton-9 was released as a new bahiagrass variety. Dr. Paul Mislevy, long time agronomist at Ona, found that Tifton-9 bahia will yield about 30% more forage, but was similar in quality to other bahia varieties when grown in experimental plots. Dr. Mislevy is currently comparing Tifton-9 and Pensacola bahiagrass varieties in grazing studies and will be reporting the results of these grazing trials over the next few years.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate