Planting Summer Legumes in Bahia Pastures

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Now is the time to start planning for planting summer legumes. At the seedling stage most of the summer legumes are sensitive to dry conditions; thus, they are best planted when we are fairly certain of a consistent rainfall pattern. In south Florida, dependable rains usually start in June.

It is recommended that summer legumes be planted only in bahiagrass pastures. We do not have research information to show that these legumes will survive for long periods in other grasses like stargrass or hemarthria (limpograss).

The two summer legumes that have grown best in south Florida are 'Florida carpon desmodium' and 'aeschynomene americana'. Of these two, Florida carpon desmodium is a perennial and has proven to be the most persistent in bahiagrass with limited management. Aeschynomene americana is an annual and to consistently grow back each year it requires assistance by chopping or light disking the bahiagrass sod. A new aeschynomene variety, 'evenia', is available which is more vigorous, more persistence and requires less management than aeschynomene americana.

'Savanna stylo' is a relatively new summer legume available to south Florida cattlemen. Savanna stylo has persistence problems, but this can be overcome with good management practices. Burning the pasture is required to keep Savanna stylo in the bahiagrass sod.

Summer legumes can be planted in new or renovated bahiagrass pastures, drilled into the sod with a sod seeder, or over seeded into bahia sod disturbed by burning, chopping or light disking. Close grazing of bahiagrass will help the young legume seedlings get established.

For good persistence, summer legumes should be allowed to go to seed each fall. This will require rotational grazing or possibly removing cattle from these pastures for a month or more in the fall. Summer legumes will also require annual fertilization with phosphorus and potassium. Again, annual chopping, disking, and/or burning of bahiagrass pastures is also recommended.

Summer legumes are available from most seed dealers in south Florida. Their use in
bahiagrass pastures adds nitrogen to the soil and they provide better nutrition to the cows diet. Ranchers are encouraged to try these forage legumes and determine how they might work in their bahiagrass pasture program. More detailed information on planting and management of summer legumes is available from local County Agricultural Extension Service Offices or the Range Cattle REC.

For questions or comments regarding this publication contact Findlay Pate.