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South Florida's Perennial Pasture Grasses

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Cattlemen have strong pro and con opinions about perennial pasture grasses available in Florida. Grasses most used in south Florida are briefly discussed below with emphasis on major advantages and disadvantages.

Bahiagrass. At least 70 percent of Florida pasture acreage is bahia. Bahia's major advantage is persistence, even with little or no management. It grows well with limited amounts of fertilizer, usually 50 pounds of N/acre. Bahia had moderate quality for most of the year, having 8 to 10 percent crude protein and about 50 percent TDN, with little or no fertilizer. It may be the best grass for small ranches where grazing management is difficult and having a dependable grass is most important.

Bahia's major problem is that it will never obtain a consistently high quality, regardless of management or fertilization practices. It is not a good grass as the only forage for young cattle, especially when a yearling breeding program is desired. Its quality, particularly TDN, is low in the winter and supplementation is needed for any class of cattle grazing bahia during this period.

Pangola Digitgrass. Pangola is probably Florida's best cow/calf grass due to its good TDN content most of the year. It can be stockpiled with fairly good results and makes good hay. It requires a complete fertilizer and at least 150 pounds of N/acre in three applications to maintain an acceptable protein content. With good fertilization and management it will produce good gains by young cattle. Its major problem is persistence. Pangola planted on virgin land 20 to 30 years ago has been lost or is fading out. It is difficult to reestablish pangola in old pastures.

Stargrass. Stargrasses are very good for grazing young cattle and making hay. With fertilization and good grazing management, yearling cattle grazing stargrass gain over one pound/ head/day. High yields of good quality hay are obtained when stargrass is cut at four to six weeks maturity. Stargrasses require fertilizer with about 150 pounds of N/acre in three applications for grazing, or 70 pounds of N/ acre prior to each hay cutting. The primary problem with stargrasses is that foliage is often lost for three to four months each winter due to frosts, and thus cannot be stockpiled. Bermudagrasses are related to stargrass and have similar advantages and problems. Bermudas have finer stems than stargrass and are slightly better for hay, but are much lower yielding.

Limpograss (Hemarthria). Bigalta and Floralta are the varieties used in Florida. Floralta is recommended because of its good persistence. Their advantage is that they maintain a good TDN content with maturity. They are our best grasses for stockpiling fall and winter grazing. They tend to be winter hardy, and produce more winter growth than other grasses during periods when several weeks of mild weather occur. Limpograsses grow best on wet areas.

A major problem with limpograsses is their relatively low crude protein content unless heavily fertilized with N. With a fertilization rate typically used by producers of 150 pounds of N/ acre annually in three applications, crude protein levels could be below that required by most classes of cattle and particularly for young cattle. With less than 50 percent of N/acre at each application crude protein content could be very low. It is important to feed a good protein supplement to cattle grazing Bigalta or Floralta in the fall and winter. Bigalta and Floralta make good hay but because of their large stem they are difficult to cure. Limpograss hay is often low in crude protein.

Rhodesgrass. This grass is high in quality and is planted with seed. It is easily established on native land, but it is difficult to establish on old pasture areas. Little is known about its long-term persistence under grazing. Ranchers are encouraged to try this grass. With time more information will be obtained on the persistence and establishment of Rhodesgrass.

Summary. Florida ranchers should realize that there is no one best grass. All have a niche in most operations. It is the good manager who fits several grasses into his pasture system to best obtain the many different production needs. It is advisable to grow two or more grasses for backup purposes because a devastating problem could happen to any one grass.