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Year-Round Grazing With Complementary Forage Grasses

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A large expense in cow-calf production is winter feeding cost. It may be impracticable to completely remove hay or concentrates from the winter feeding system, however, increasing the number of days of grazing can significantly reduce winter feeding cost.

Bahiagrass pasture remains our major feed resource for cow-calf production because of the lower input requirement per animal and its ability to persist under adverse conditions. However, bahia produces 86 to 90% of total seasonal yield from April to September. Fall dormancy prohibits winter production from bahia pastures. Fortunately, there are marked differences in yield distribution and quality among several warm season grasses available to Florida cattlemen which can reduce winter feeding cost.

Bermudagrasses, including Coastal, Suwannee, Brazos, Alicia, Coastcross-1, Tifton 78, Tifton 85, and Florakirk grow best during the warm season, but continue to make some growth under cool (40-50°F) fall conditions. Bermudagrasses are adapted to well drained soils with the exception of Florakirk which will persist and perform well on saturated flatwood soils. Besides Tifton 85, for the sandy ridges, and Florakirk, bermudagrasses are generally not recommended for pasture south of Orlando.

Stargrasses (Florona, Florico, Ona) perform best in the warm season and show some growth in the fall. They are adapted to wet flatwood soils, producing 10-30% higher daily gains and 32-50% higher liveweight gain than bermudagrasses and bahiagrass in south-central Florida. Ranchers south of Orlando should consider stargrasses over bermudagrasses for growing yearling cattle during summer and fall. Stargrasses and bermudagrasses are frost susceptible, and must be consumed within a week after a frost because their quality and palatability decline rapidly.

Warm-season grasses that come closest to a "miracle grass" for year-round growth are the limpograsses (Bigalta and Floralta). Limpograsses (hemarthrias) are well adapted to seasonally wet or flooded soils, have higher forage production in spring and fall when temperatures are cooler, have higher organic matter digestibility (5-10 units) at similar maturities, and support higher stocking rates than bahiagrass. Accumulated forage has higher quality and cattle have better performance when grazing stockpiled limpograss forage. Major disadvantages of limpograsses are a low crude protein content (6% or less) when mature and the need to leave about a 6-inch stubble under grazing.

Many producers use Floralta for deferred grazing by stockpiling it in late fall for winter pasture. Limpograss pastures are vacated in late September and early October to concentrate grazing on stargrass and bahiagrass pastures. Between 50-100 lb/A of N is applied at this time. Limpograss is relatively frost tolerant and continues to produce growth in the lower canopy after a frost. There is a need to monitor crude protein content of stockpiled Floralta forage during utilization. Feeding a high protein urea-based supplement improved animal performance on stockpiled limpograss forage in Gainesville. For early spring utilization, N fertilizer is applied to Floralta between mid February and mid March.

A three-way pasture system based on stargrasses (intensive summer and fall grazing for growing cattle); bahiagrass (for mature cows and bulls), and floralta (stockpiled for winter grazing and early spring grazing for all types of cattle) may be considered for near year-round grazing in south and central Florida.