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Some Factors to Consider When Managing Bahigrass-Carpon Desmodium Pastures

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Carpon desmodium is an introduced, perennial, summer-growing legume which is closely related to creeping beggarweed and can be effectively used in flatwoods pastures. From late spring through summer when days are long and temperatures are high, bahigrass grows at a considerably faster rate than carpon desmodium. During this period, grazing is advantageous to carpon desmodium. Sufficient grazing pressure to utilize the grass as it grows prevents excessive shading and competition to the legume.

Unlike many high quality pasture legumes, carpon desmodium is not selectively grazed in most cases and is quite tolerant of rather heavy grazing pressure. Thus moderate to heavy grazing during late spring and summer can reduce the competitive advantage of the warm-season grasses over grazing-tolerant legumes such as carpon desmodium.

As day-length becomes shorter in late August and early September, the growth rate of bahigrass decreases. This results in a competitive advantage for carpon desmodium. Thus, reduced grazing pressure or deferment from grazing for portions of the autumn growing period can increase the production from carpon desmodium. Increased plant growth of this legume will provide high protein forage for autumn grazing.

Allowing carpon desmodium growth to accumulate during autumn provides an opportunity for extra energy produced by the plant to be used for biological nitrogen fixation, thus adding nitrogen to the pasture. A third benefit of reduced grazing pressure during autumn on bahigrass-carpon desmodium pastures (in addition to accumulation of high protein forage and enhanced biological nitrogen fixation) is seed production from carpon desmodium.

Even when commercial seed harvest is not planned, some seed production by the legume is beneficial. Even though they are perennial, individual carpon desmodium plants do not live forever. New plants gradually replace old plants over the years as grazing pressure and environmental stresses weaken old plants. A continuing modest input of carpon desmodium seed each autumn will assure sufficient seed supplies for replacement of plants as occasional stresses such as drought weaken the existing legume stand.

Management for seed production through decreased grazing pressure or even complete deferment from grazing can be especially beneficial when attempting to increase partial stands of carpon desmodium. Following seed maturity in November, these pastures should be grazed to scatter the carpon desmodium seed throughout the pasture. Such a strategy has also been successfully used to spread carpon desmodium from one pasture to another.

For commercial seed production, heavy early-summer grazing followed by complete deferment from grazing from early August until seed harvest in November is generally recommended. This extended period without grazing results in enhanced nitrogen fixation for future pasture production in addition to the seed crop.