



Winter Annual Management

January 6, 2012

In Georgia, our biggest competitive advantage in the beef cattle industry is our ability to grow and graze forages during the winter months. One of the most important parts of a winter forage program is, of course, the cool season annual grasses. However, it takes skill and a healthy dose of common sense to manage winter annuals so that the forage produced matches the stocking rate. Now that winter annuals are in the ground around the county, I wanted to give seven quick keys to optimize the production and management of this important forage.

Avoid grazing too early - There is a big difference between “can” and “should”. You can graze these forages as soon as they accumulated 3-4 inches of growth. However, grazing should only begin after the plants accumulate 6-8 inches of growth. The plants will survive if they are grazed too early, but they will never fully recover and you lose up to one-third of its production potential.

Start light, end heavy – It’s best to begin with a light stocking rate and gradually increase it as the growing conditions improve and forage growth rate increases. A good way to do this is by restricting the animal’s time on the paddock, rotating animals between paddocks, or using a strip grazing technique. Later in the season when the growth rate is much more rapid, a light stocking rate will reduce in overly mature forage that is not ideal. The best to increase your stocking rate and take advantage of the forage will be to reduce the numbers of acres grazed by shutting some animals of some pastures or paddocks and letting that forage grow for hay or baleage.

Know your forage – Our winter annuals can differ a lot in their tolerance of grazing. Ryegrass and rye are very tolerant of grazing and regrow rapidly while wheat and oats grow quite a bit slower and have poor tolerance of heavy or continuous grazing. Just like G.I. Joe always used to say, “Knowing is half the battle.”

Feather the throttle – Imagine you have an old truck or tractor with bad breaks. You have to think ahead of time in order to slow down and stop. The same is true for winter annuals, meaning you have to think ahead and know when to throttle back on production. Putting down N at planting is critical as that initial 40-50 lbs of N per acre will increase tillering and provide earlier grazing. You should also apply 40-50 lbs per acre in mid-January to early February if there is a great need to increase winter and spring production. If there is less need, you should “throttle back.” With ryegrass, which is a longer-lived winter annual, you can even apply N a third time at 40-50 lbs per acre to provide forage and also hay or baleage production. However, ryegrass is very responsive to N fertilizer so you should pay careful attention to your forage to know when to throttle back. Late ryegrass production can also decrease bermudagrass yields by up to 50%, so if you don’t the extra ryegrass or are worried about your bermudagrass, you can decrease the N rate or cut it out all together.

Adjust for previous weather conditions – We’ve had pretty ideal growing conditions the last couple of months for winter annuals with relatively warm weather and adequate rainfall. Given those conditions, plant growth rates will be much greater and the plant will require adequate N fertility. You will want to use the plant to tell you if there is a deficiency by getting a plant tissue analysis done. You can contact the Extension office for more information on this.

Adjust for future weather conditions – Farmers are always have to gamble on predicting the weather to plan their management strategies. Although our summer weather patterns are difficult to predict, our winter weather can be forecasted out with relative accuracy. The National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center has a great website at www.cpc.ncep.noaa.gov and provides up to a 3-month outlook.

Adjust for low fertility – An abundant N supply will not be helpful if the pH is so low that the plant can’t extract it from the soil. Low potassium will also limit the growth of the plant even if plenty of N is available. Low pH and low K are probably the two most common problems I’ve seen in soil samples submitted to the office. You should collect soil samples and plan accordingly to get the most out of your forage.

For more information on fertilizing and managing your winter annuals, or for just about anything else, you can contact the Extension office at 795-2281.