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News and Information from UT-TSU Extension Wilson County

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Crabgrass Can Be a Good Summer Forage

Mention crabgrass as a good summer forage for livestock and you will often get a laugh. Even though it has a reputation as a lawn weed, crabgrass is a high quality, very palatable grass that is excellent forage for grazing livestock. It is a summer annual grass that germinates in spring, grows through summer and dies at frost in fall. Daily weight gains of livestock grazing crabgrass can easily exceed that from bermudagrass. It is very productive under good management. Crabgrass works well to provide summer forage when grown in mixtures with cool season grasses such as tall fescue or with small grains used for forage.

Crabgrass has a much maligned history but has gained favor as a high-quality forage over the past couple decades. For years, producers noticed that livestock readily grazed this “weedy grass,” but work from the Noble Research Institute in Oklahoma brought it to the forefront as a valued forage when the variety “Red River” was released. Red River was the first named variety and was the forerunner of others such as Quick-N-Big. R.L. Dalrymple, a forage agronomist now retired from the Noble Research Institute tested many selections of crabgrass.

Crabgrass is a warm-season annual grass, meaning it germinates in spring, grows through summer, and dies at fall frost. It is also adapted to more Northern latitudes than bermudagrass, thus providing a summer forage option for a wide geographical area. Crabgrass is an annual but will reseed itself in subsequent years so does not have to be reseeded each year.

Crabgrass responds well to rotational grazing. Grazing can begin when it reaches 4 to 6 inches tall. During the growing season, crabgrass is very palatable and is often grazed first by animals turned into a new pasture; however, crabgrass becomes very unpalatable after a killing frost and is usually avoided by grazing animals. Plan to use grazeable forage before frost occurs. This management approach allows other pastures such as stockpiled fescue to accumulate growth, which can be grazed later in fall to reduce hay feeding.

Crabgrass has a clump-type growth habit and spreads by long stolons or runners that root down at the nodes. It can grow to over 2-feet tall, is adapted to a wide range of environments, and grows best on well-drained soils. Though crabgrass tolerates drought, planting on sites that are not excessively drought-susceptible during summer will result in the greatest forage production. It is a prolific reseed, and being an annual species, it quickly colonizes disturbed soil.

Crabgrass is forgiving of low pH and grows well in a range from 5.5 to 7.5. It is normally planted in mid- to late spring in our area. Planting after midsummer is risky due to the undependability of late-summer rainfall. Seed a minimum of 2 pounds of pure live seed (PLS) per acre, but planting 3 to 5 pounds of PLS per acre helps ensure better stands. Two-year-old seed has been noted to have a higher establishment rate than 1-year-old seed.

Crabgrass can be broadcast or drilled. It is important to get the seed to the soil but planted very shallow. Crabgrass seed is hairy and does not flow well through drill seeders. It is often mixed with a carrier such as fertilizer, dry sand, or pelletized lime to improve spreadability. When broadcast planting, the spreader should be driven almost track-to-track since the crabgrass seed will not spread as far as the fertilizer or pellet lime.

If drilling, planting too deep is a bigger concern than planting too shallow. Research shows that light stimulates germination and most seedlings emerge from within the top ½ to 1/2-inch of soil. With adequate moisture and temperature, some crabgrass seed will germinate within a few days, though the new stand may continue to thicken over a period of two months. Once established, crabgrass can quickly cover bare soil. Be cautious of seeding too deep. Cattle can be grazing crabgrass about 40 days after seedling emergence.

Crabgrass is gaining the reputation as high-quality forage instead of as a weed. Palatability and forage quality are excellent. It is useful for providing high-quality summer pasture or hay to support good animal performance for stocker calves, dairy cattle, small ruminants, and horses. It works well in mixtures with small grains and some perennial cool-season grasses.

For more information on this and other forage questions, contact the UT-TSU Extension Office in Wilson County at 615-444-9584. You can also find us on Facebook or visit our website: extension.tennessee.edu/wilson

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