

RUMOR SPREADIN' 'ROUND

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In all forage production operations, there are several decisions that will influence the productivity and profitability of the farm. One of the most important decisions is which forage species are you going to use. I am always getting questions about forage species people heard were really good for certain reasons. Maybe a friend from another state mentioned something, or a magazine article discussed it. The question of which forage species to use can be very important.

That decision will influence many things. We all know it will influence how much yield there will be. But it also influences other things, such as how much hay you will need during winter, how much fertilizer you have to apply, and how often you will need to reseed. The best forage species can be specific for our state and even the region within the state.

Texas will have a completely different set of options for species. Bermudagrass, annual ryegrass and various clover species are their choices for forage production. Tennessee doesn't have as long of a summer, so tall fescue, red and white clover are usually our best choice for the base of a forage program.

Town choices are sometimes similar to forage species choices. Some like small towns, while others like larger cities. It depends on your preferences. But for most forage producers in our state, tall fescue is the main forage to use. It is a cool-season perennial grass that has been used for decades in Tennessee and the mid-south. There are several reasons, but the biggest one is the long growing season. There are very few species that will provide as long a grazing season as tall fescue.

About five years is as long as orchardgrass, another cool-season perennial grass, will survive in Tennessee pastures. Other grasses like perennial ryegrass and timothy last only one or two years. Keeping a thick stand of grass is important to have good yield with reduced weed pressure. As stands thin, ground area opens up, allowing weeds to germinate and grow.

That is one of the reasons tall fescue has worked well. It is more persistent under grazing, keeping high plant populations for longer periods, reducing how often producers have to reseed pastures. If you look at the economics of forage production, the length of a stand life is one of the big factors influencing profitability. Getting an extra few years from a productive stand can cut costs because planting is expensive.

Shack is a type of house that works but is maybe not long-lasting and nice compared to a mansion. When thinking about pastures, don't be satisfied with a shack, go for the mansion. Choose forage species that fit the needs for your specific situation. Start by considering using both cool and warm-season grasses on your farm. Then choose the best clovers/legumes to improve quality and add nitrogen to the soil.

Outside of tall fescue, red and white clover, there are several species that add value to a forage program. Warm-season grasses like bermudagrass, native grasses, crabgrass, and sorghum x sudangrass hybrids can be used to provide good quality forage for summer grazing. Cool-season annuals such as wheat, rye, triticale and turnips can provide grazing for winter periods, extending the use of stockpiled tall fescue.

La Grange to Mountain City, forage producers can use many of the same species of forage. Maybe there is a need to slightly change varieties or ratios of mixtures as one moves from west to east. But forage species choices are important. Make sure prior to planting any forage you haven't used before you determine what characteristics the species has that benefits your current program.