

Column Name- The Heartland Minute

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*“Crabgrass as an Alternative Forage”*

Pasture is one of our most important livestock feed sources in eastern Kansas. Most notably so here in the Flint Hills. We do have pasture systems with cool-season forages. With this, a lack of forage availability may occur during the summer. Cool and warm season grasses have different photosynthetic mechanisms, which provides the opportunity to extend the grazing season of these systems by establishing a warm-season forage like crabgrass.

Crabgrass is an annual species, but can be managed as a perennial due to its high capacity to produce seeds, which allows reseeding. Many producers may consider it as a weed, but with high yield and palatability, some may find it as a suitable alternative forage source during the warm growing season.

Establishment: Crabgrass is to be seeded in a clean area in the spring when there is little chance of frost. Drilling depth should be set no deeper than ¼ inch. Planting below ½ inch may result in a poor pasture stand. Broadcasting is also an option, but it is recommended to cultipack after the seeding to improve seed to soil contact and reduce possible loss in the event of a heavy rainfall.

Good stand establishment can be accomplished with a 4 – 6 pounds of pure live seed per acre seeding rate. With adequate moisture, seed germination begins when the soil temperature reaches 55 degrees F for four to five consecutive days. An application of nitrogen once seeds have germinated and tillers are in the early stages, can speed up establishment.

Weed Control: This will be essential for good establishment. Maintaining adequate soil fertility levels to stimulate crabgrass growth serves as the best way to control weeds. Faster establishment correlates with a lower chance of weeds to grow. In addition, adequate harvest management helps to control weeds by avoiding overharvesting. When stubble heights are lower than 3-4 inches, the plant reserves may be compromised, reducing the capacity and the velocity of regrowth. Lower stubble height may result in thinner stands where the weeds will find room to emerge.

Fertilization and Harvesting Management: Soil fertility directly affects forage production and quality. It is important to highlight that fertilization should be done based on soil test results. You can contact our office about soil sampling fields and sending samples for analysis. Phosphorus is the most important nutrient during the establishment phase. It stimulates root development and tillering. In established pastures, nitrogen is the most important nutrient as nitrogen increases forage yield and improves quality. Potassium enhances the nitrogen effect and needs to be taken into consideration in southeast Kansas, where potassium soil levels are commonly lower.

When forage plants are harvested, it stimulates the production of new leaves that have higher photosynthetic potential and nutritive value. In a rotational stocking system, the pasture should be grazed when the canopy height is more than 12 inches to maintain high forage quality. Ideally, the best condition to graze a crabgrass pasture is when the canopy reaches 6 – 8 inches in height. At the same time, keeping the stubble height not lower than 3-4 inches is essential. The same recommendation can be used to define hay harvesting.

Save the date for upcoming programs related to livestock and farm management. February 20, 2025 will be a “Heifer Development & Risk Management” meeting with KSRE Cow-Calf Specialist, Dr. Jason Warner. Meeting will be at the Yates Center Community Building, starting at 6 pm with a meal and program to follow at 6:30 pm. March 13, 2025 will be “Livestock Watering System Options” tour and demo. Timing will be middle of the day with a lunch provided. Location TBD. Please contact the office for more information and to RSVP.

Information comes from KSRE Northeast Area Agronomist, Tina Sullivan.