

OPPORTUNITIES FOR WARM SEASON GRASSES

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Today I would like to do two things, first talk a little about warm season grasses, where they come from, and where they might fit in your grazing program; and second, talk about the four major native grass species and two introduced species.

Native warm season perennial grasses were an important part of the native forage species of Kentucky, supplying food and cover for deer, buffalo, and other wildlife when settlers arrived into Kentucky. With settlers plowing, overgrazing, and the introduction of other forages, Native Warm Season Grasses (NWSGs) were on the brink of extinction. These grasses included switchgrass, eastern gamagrass, indiagrass, and big bluestem. Over the past several years, there has been interest in re-establishing these grasses back into Kentucky, for soil conservation, wildlife and forages for livestock.

There are two different types of warm season grasses, native and introduced. Of course, native were already here, introduced came from Asia. Introduced WSGs are fine stemmed, leafy grasses that are grazed or mowed shorter and more frequently than natives, they are bermudagrass and Caucasian Bluestem. Introduced grasses may be more productive, but do not form good wildlife habitats. In the past, most of the native WSGs were used for wildlife habitats, this is changing as more emphasis is placed on mid summer production.

Cool season grasses of Kentucky like tall fescue, orchardgrass, bluegrass, and timothy are the primary forage grasses. For summer production Kentucky must look for options during the summer. The cool season grasses are productive in spring and fall but become semidormant during summer. The WSGs produce almost twice the tonnage of cool season forages. Warm season grasses are more palatable than fescue in the summer; they produce steer gains in summer months of over two pounds a day compared to nine tenths of a pound for fescue. Other benefits of WSGs is their ability to be grown on a wide range of soils, they fill a niche in year-round forage production in the summer. Less fertilizer is required for acceptable production, but NWSGs will respond higher in outputs if fertilizer is provided.

Nothing is all positive. WSG seed is more expensive. Management is a key to grazing or mowing for hay. They are not as easy to establish as cool season grasses. It takes at least two years to get a complete stand. Some seeds have to be chilled before planting, while others need to be soaked in water. Special drills may be needed,

because seed placement is vital for optimal growth of WSGs. Probably the most important is the control of competitive grasses and weeds.

Establishing NWSG is no easy task, but new advantages in herbicides, no till drills and experience have increased our success in establishing grasses.

Furthermore, NWSGs can not be grazed like cool season grasses because of several major differences. These include length of rest period needed, sensitivity to close grazing, the need for 8-12 inch residual forage heights, and the need for rest before going into the winter.

Warm season perennial grasses have the potential to supply grazing for Kentucky during the summer when most cool season grasses are least productive. The producer can expect very little production for the first year. However, good forage quality and quantity can be rendered if managed and maintained with patience. NWSGs may work with some producers and may not fit in other programs. I hope you think about these thoughts with an open mind, this might work for you.