

Mike's Paddock



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The cooler mornings and increasingly shorter daylight hours should be a good indication to grazers that fall is here.

By now, both warm and cool season perennial grasses have finished reproducing and, if you applied the right pasture management in spring and summer, the pasture bases should be relatively free of dead matter and ready to produce some good, quality fall forage.

Managing northern cool season perennials

Those grazers in the north who depend on cool season perennials such as tall fescue and/or ryegrass should be considering an application of approximately 50 units of nitrogen to boost forage quality and quantity. Quality highly digestible feed means continued milk production. Quantity is used to increase grazing round length to ensure enough forage until winter dictates a different management strategy.

Tight grazing residuals in the fall can unnecessarily tax root systems going into winter. Healthy plants in winter mean a strong resurgence in the spring. As a rule of thumb think 1,700–1,800 pounds of dry matter per acre rather than spring's 1,500–1,600.



Getting it while you can

Those grazers in the south who graze the warm season C4 grasses like bermudagrass, Tifton 85 and bahiagrass will be noticing a definite decline in forage production. Tifton 85 can sometimes be a slight exception to the rule. All these grasses are susceptible to cooling daytime temperatures and fall frosts that drive them into dormancy. Fall grazing management with warm seasonal perennials is really all about getting the grazable forage off them while you have it.

Resist putting valuable nitrogen fertilizer on these grasses to boost

fall growth. While you may get a small return in forage growth, you won't get anywhere near an economic return on the investment. Management should be focused more on the preparation of fields for the sowing of fall season annuals.

Using cool season annuals

If you're grazing in the north and have planned to graze some form of cool season annual until the snow starts flying, the seed should already be in the ground. I've seen some awesome crops of both annual and Italian ryegrass, oats and triticale no-tilled into corn silage stubble that have really been worth their weight



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in gold. The ryegrasses can stand some pretty severe winter weather and can provide valuable early grazing forage. The trick to managing these is to on-off graze if wet or muddy spring conditions exist.

It is in the south that cool season annuals shine. Cool season annuals can help the southern grazer get as many as 300–320 days if he does it right and the weather plays ball. By now, southern fall forage planning should be well underway. The seed should be in the barn waiting for the right conditions to sow. If you plan to sow into a cultivated seedbed as part of a paddock renovation program, the Roundup® should already be on and existing pasture looking very sick. Your favorite mix should have been in the ground by the middle of October.

Don't forget the fertilizer. Those grazers planning to no-till need to wait just a little longer. Depending on where you are, timely rain this summer has kept things greener than usual. As I wrote earlier, graze the green stuff while you have it. However, don't go on too long. Your winter rye should be in the ground as of late October to guarantee establishment and a winter and early spring grazing before it flags out and

goes to seed. Again, don't forget the fertilizer, especially nitrogen. All cool season annuals love nitrogen and will perform great provided they get fed. Winter annuals can provide the southern grazing dairyman with some of the cheapest milk production he will get during the lactation year.

Taking stock of your soil

Fall is the best time of the year to do annual soil tests. It's been said a soil test can be the cheapest fertilizer you can buy. If you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. Too often farmers put on the same brew year after year, not realizing that the phosphorous and potassium levels are sky high. Then they wonder why the nitrogen doesn't work like it used to. A soil test could show that the pH is suppressed and all that's required is some lime to allow tied-up nutrients to become available. Lime is best applied in the fall to allow winter breakdown and absorption. A soil test is really no different than an annual physical. Optimum soil health is essential for maximum forage production. If it applies for row croppers, it applies to grazers.

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The establishment of United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) new Margin Protection Program (MPP) offers dairy producers another level of protection.

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