



FORAGE FACTS

Publication Series

UTILIZING CRABGRASS AS A FORAGE

INTRODUCTION

Crabgrass is a summer annual forage that has the potential to produce a large quantity of high-quality forage during the summer months. It is a highly palatable forage that provides excellent grazing and makes top-quality hay when properly managed. The area of adaptation for crabgrass is primarily in the southern and south-eastern states where sufficient rainfall, moderate temperatures, and long growing seasons permit optimum production. The growing season and area of adaptation for crabgrass are similar to those for Bermudagrass. Crabgrass makes maximum growth during warm summer months when there is sufficient rainfall. Crabgrass is especially useful for grazing during July and August when cool-season perennial grasses such as tall fescue are semi-dormant and produce suboptimal animal gains.

The Noble Foundation at Ardmore, Oklahoma, developed and released the variety Red River through a selection process of the naturalized crabgrasses. Red River, the only known developed variety of crabgrass, will generally produce more forage than common crabgrass and will likely be the only crabgrass seed that is commercially available.

Crabgrass should be planted on a firm, well-prepared seedbed during early spring to midsummer. Planting should occur when the bare soil temperature in the upper 2 to 4 inches is consistently above 70°F at midday. Good agronomic practices are especially critical for initial establishment of crabgrass since successive crops are dependent upon volunteer reseeding from the previous year. Recommended seeding rate is 3 pounds of pure live seed per acre for most situations. Seed should not be planted more than ½ inch deep. Crabgrass seed does not flow well due to its small size and rough-textured husk. Planting is often done by mixing the seed with fertilizer or some other material, such as dry sand, to provide bulk and improve flow characteristics. When seeding crabgrass with a rotary fertilizer spreader, keep in mind that most of these spreaders will only throw crabgrass seed about 25 feet.

Therefore, spread width and spreader calibration rate must be adjusted accordingly. Grass seed planters with a good agitator in the bottom of the hopper can plant the pure seed.

It is necessary to remove grazing livestock from crabgrass pastures at least two to three weeks in advance of the first frost in order to allow sufficient seed production for next year's crop. Shallow annual tillage is necessary to incorporate the seed into the soil so that it will voluntarily emerge in succeeding years. This operation needs to be done early in the winter or early in the spring before the last frost in order to not interfere with crabgrass emergence.

Phosphorus and potassium should be applied according to a soil test along with 75 to 100 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre. A general rule is to apply 1 to 2 pounds of nitrogen per acre for each day of expected acceptable growing conditions. Lower rates are used on sandy soils and in low rainfall situations. Crabgrass does best on soils that are moderately acidic to slightly basic.

Grazing can begin when crabgrass is 4 to 6 inches tall. Grazing and haying management should mini-

mize the appearance of seed heads. Hay should be harvested before the plant reaches maturity. Plants should not be mowed or grazed closer than 3 inches above the soil surface to allow opportunity for maximum regrowth. Timely mowing may be necessary to control weeds, keep the crabgrass from becoming mature, and minimize spot grazing. Stocking rates can be as high as 800 to 1,200 pounds of liveweight per acre depending upon levels of fertility and rainfall. Gains of stocker cattle have averaged approximately 1.50 pounds per day when adequate conditions for plant growth existed.

Crabgrass can be grown in a double-crop program with a winter annual cereal such as wheat or rye. In this system, the crabgrass is completely grazed out by September 1, the ground is fertilized, lightly disked, and wheat or rye is planted. The cereal is grazed out in late spring just prior to crabgrass emergence. Lightly disking or dragging the soil prior to crabgrass emergence in the spring will likely improve crabgrass stands. While the double-crop system allows for more total forage production per acre, crabgrass will typically produce more forage over a longer period of time when grown as a single crop.

Contact: L. W. Lomas
Head and Animal Scientist
Southeast Agricultural Research Center
Telephone: 316-421-4826
FAX: 316-421-0136
E-mail: llomas@oznet.ksu.edu

Contact: J. L. Moyer
Agronomy/Forages
Southeast Agricultural Research Center
Telephone: 316-421-4826
FAX: 316-421-0136
E-mail: jmoyer@oznet.ksu.edu

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