Wanting More “Green” Early in Spring?

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It is February and many of us are anxiously waiting for spring, especially if we’ve been feeding hay. Most pastures have a straw-colored look about them. Green fields are short and not abundant enough. Although there was good rainfall in the fall of 2011 across most of southern Oklahoma and northern Texas, the winter pasture that was planned for last fall may not have developed to expectations or was not planted due to poor moisture conditions going into the fall. What can be planted now to bring about earlier spring pasture? Following are the two most common recommendations.

Recommendation 1
If you have cropland that does not currently have winter pasture on it, spring oats are a good alternative. Oats are probably the most palatable of cereal crops and grow rapidly once soil temperatures begin to warm. Oats will germinate with soil temperatures at 40 degrees or above. Soil temperature and moisture conditions will determine the rate of development in the spring.

The recommended planting date is between mid-February and mid-March. The recommended seeding rate is 2 to 3 bushels per acre (bushel weight for oats is 32 pounds) or 65 to 100 pounds per acre. If planted conventionally, the lower seeding rate would be acceptable, but use a higher rate for a “broadcast-disc” planting. For spring plantings, apply about 50 to 100 pounds per acre of actual nitrogen, and control weeds as needed. With good growing conditions, oats can produce 4,000 to 5,000 pounds per acre, although 2,000 to 3,000 pounds would be more typical. Oats can be grazed or hayed.

Dallas, Harrison and Horizon 314 varieties have performed well in fall-planted Noble Foundation tests at the Ardmore campus since 2000. In a spring-planted variety test the winter of 2001-2002 conducted by Dr. Brent Bean and Dr. Calvin Trostle of the Texas Cooperative Extension in the Texas Panhandle, Walken, Troy and Monida oat varieties were recommended for grazing and hay, with Charisma and Magnum oats also recommended for hay.

Recommendation 2
If you have some bermudagrass pasture that is grazed short at this time, broadcasting ryegrass is still the best option for early spring grazing. Broadcast 15 to 20 pounds of seed per acre by early March. Apply 50 to 100 pounds per acre of actual nitrogen when broadcasting seed. If the ryegrass is already present, either add seed at a reduced rate or only apply nitrogen. Production ranges from about 2,000 to 4,000 pounds for a spring planting, depending on the year.

Ryegrass varieties that have performed well in the Noble Foundation variety tests from 2006 through 2010 include Marshall, Passerel Plus, Jackson, TAMTBO and Big Boss, just to mention a few. General planting recommendations would be to plant no more than 1 acre of ryegrass per mature grazing cow. Ryegrass typically remains productive into early June and can retard spring growth of the bermudagrass. For that reason, it is not typically recommended to overseed ryegrass on your best bermudagrass pastures. If bermudagrass production is essential from an overseeded area, graze or hay off the ryegrass by early May.

One major benefit of planting ryegrass is its ability to reseed itself. With a good seed crop, little or no seeding will be necessary the following year, thus reducing establishment cost. Ryegrass will establish more rapidly on a clean field, but consideration should be given when planting.
Sandy soils are generally not considered suitable for either oats or ryegrass, and neither crop will perform very well on soils prone to remaining saturated during the spring. However, ryegrass tolerates standing water better than oats. The ideal soils for both oats and ryegrass are loams and well-drained clay soils.

### Final notes

Whenever you are establishing a crop or pasture, attention needs to be given to pH, phosphorus, potassium and soil type. Sample soils and test them to determine nutrient levels so deficiencies can be identified prior to planting. If anything other than nitrogen is needed, it may not be cost-effective to establish an annual crop such as oats or ryegrass this spring. Also keep in mind that extremely on cropland. Because of its reseeding capability, ryegrass can become a difficult to control, grassy weed species if other cool-season grain crops are planted in future years.

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