Establishing Perennial Pasture in Central Florida

Perennial pastures provide the majority of nutrients to grazing livestock all year-long in Central Florida. Horses, cattle, goats, sheep, and other small ruminants are able to utilize forages, primarily grasses in Florida, to meet most, if not all, of their nutritional requirements to grow and reproduce.

It is necessary to determine the best forage for your soil and the desired use of the forage. The first step is taking a soil sample and having it analyzed. This should be completed at least six months before the desired planting date. If your soil is below pH 5.5, the area will need to have lime or dolomite applied, which will require two to six months to adjust the soil pH. Be sure that you lime according to the soil test result. Brevard County has many areas where the soil pH is greater than pH 5.5-8, and adding lime to these soils will be detrimental to the growth of most pasture plants.

Ground Preparation

The objective for ground preparation is to reduce soil clump size, mix liming material, and eliminate competitive vegetation. Plowing, disking, or rototilling the soil multiple times will accomplish these objectives. The theory is, if you work the soil, killing the weeds, and let the weed seed that is in the soil germinate then work it again and again, each cycle will reduce the amount of weed seed that will be available to germinate and compete with the desired planted forage variety.

Planting

There are two methods used to plant grasses: seeding and sprigging.

Seeding can be done by use of drill or a broadcast spreader. Drills require less seed than broadcast spreaders because the drill places each seed at the same depth, where the broadcast spreader leaves some seed too deep and some too shallow. A roller or cultipacker should be used to pack the soil firmly around the seed and to conserve moisture when either method is used to distribute the seed.

Some of our tropical grasses do not produce good seed, therefore sprigs, which can be roots or tops from digit type grasses, must be used. Examples of grasses that need to be sprigged include many of the hybrid Bermudagrasses, Limpograss, Stargrass, and Pangola. Sprigging is accomplished by spreading the dug roots or the cut tops of digit type grass over the prepared seed bed, disking them in, and rolling the soil firmly around the seeding material. Sprigging material from digit grasses should be cut from recently fertilized fields after the seed grass has been allowed to mature (10-12 weeks of regrowth). Planting rate is 1000-1500 pounds per acre. Planting material should be cut and planted in the same day, and the material should not be allowed to dry out or heat up.
Weed Control

Do not use any herbicide on newly seeded Bahia grass until the Bahia grass is more than five inches tall. A mixture of 2,4-D and Dicamba (i.e. WeedMaster) can be used 7-10 days post planting to control weeds, including sedges, when sprigging grasses. If herbicide is not used or Bahiagrass is seeded, weed control options are limited to mowing.

Fertilization

Apply fertilizer according to the results of the soil test recommendation. Apply 30 pounds of nitrogen, all the recommended phosphorus, and half of the recommended potassium per acre as soon as the plants emerge. Wait another 30-50 days, then apply an additional 60-80 pounds of nitrogen plus the other half of the recommended potassium.

Grazing

Do not allow grazing animals on the newly planted grass until it is well rooted. That will require a couple months. Only lightly graze after that during the first year for best establishment and limited weed intrusion.

More Resources

- Florida Forage Handbook: http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ag170
- Forages of Florida: http://agronomy.ifas.ufl.edu/foragesofflorida/