

SOMETIMES MOTHER NATURE IS MOODY

*Dr. Gary Bates, Director
UT Beef and Forage Center*

We all have mood swings. Sometimes I am in a great mood, joking, humming a tune, and generally a pleasant person to be around. And then other times I may be a little grumpy, with limited patience for the people around me. I try to moderate my moodiness, and expect others to show a little understanding. If you are honest, you have a few mood swings in your past. The key is to recognize the mood, and then minimize the negative impact it might have on people. In other words, you just need to keep your mouth shut.

We have a friend we will call Mother Nature, and she can have some extreme mood swings. She can spend some time just as sweet as pie, with moderate temperatures gentle rains, and overall perfect conditions for most anything we want to do. But she can turn, get angry, and decide to turn up the temperature and withhold the water we so desperately need. She spent some time in August, September and October this in a seriously bad mood.

So what are we to do about that? You need to recognize some patterns. It is not unusual to have heat and drought in July and August. Maybe we expect it to end in September, but drought is the norm, not the exception. Once we have recognized the pattern, we can begin to make plans to minimize the impact. There are several things we can do.

First, we can start to improve our grazing management. Overgrazing stresses plants and decreases their production and persistence. We often get by overgrazing tall fescue because it is such a hardy plant. But if you overgraze during a drought, you will kill some of the plants, which then leads to decreased production when it finally begins to rain. You need to cut pasture size down and develop a more, smaller pastures so you can move cattle off some of the pastures and give them a chance to rest and replace root energy reserves.

A second thing you can do is plant some of your pastures to a warm-season grass. Grasses such as bermudagrass, crabgrass, sorghum x sudangrass, and big bluestem are more adapted to summer temperatures, are more efficient in their water use, and will be more productive during the summer period. When moisture begins to be limiting, these species will continue to grow when tall fescue begins to go dormant. A few acres of one of these will give you a pasture that can be grazed when you need to rest your tall fescue.

We can never eliminate the impact that drought has, but we can moderate or reduce that impact. Grazing management and selecting warm-season forage species are two important methods to use. Think back to August and September. If drought was hammering your farm, consider planting a warm-season grass this summer. You can find more information on warm-season grasses from your local Extension agent or at UTBeef.com.