

A TIME FOR REFLECTION

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

I always look forward to this time of year. The holidays bring a chance to spend time with family, celebrating the gift of Jesus' birth and being grateful for everything that has brought into my life. It is also a time to look forward to a new year and think back on all the blessings and struggles of this past year. I can think of things I wish I could go back and change, as well as things I would do exactly the same.

Now is a good time to do the same thing with respect to your forage program. Think about this past year, considering things that went well and things that could have worked better. Can you relate specific good or bad occurrences to a particular management practice? If so, now is the time to make plans for what you are going to do the same next year, because it worked well this year. Or there may be things that didn't work well, so you need to make changes. Now is the time to consider those also.

We all know the weather has a large impact on our forage programs, but don't fall into the trap of blaming or crediting the weather with letting you have a good year or causing a bad year. Put practices in place to help minimize the impact of weather on your program. Here are a few things to think about now that can be put into practice over the next few months.

Adding clovers. We can never mention planting clovers enough in these articles. Clovers are a vital part of any efficient forage program. You should make a concentrated effort to have clovers in every grass pasture and hayfield on your farm. Clovers add nitrogen to the soil, improve forage quality, and reduce the impact of the tall fescue endophyte. Mid to late February is the time to plant red and white clover. Use both to lengthen the clover production season.

Improve your grazing management. Giving pasture plants a chance to regrow after grazing will improve their yield and persistence. Most people realize that you need to be careful of overgrazing during summer, when heat and drought cause stress on our pastures. But overgrazing during the spring will limit plant root growth, setting your pastures up to be more sensitive to summer heat and drought. Cut your pasture size down with temporary fencing to allow a pasture to be grazed, then move animals to another field. This will allow the grazed pasture to regrow leaves and replace some of the energy stored in the roots, which is essential for grass survival. Your goal should be to graze tall fescue down to 3-4 inches, then allow it to regrow back to 8-10 inches before regrazing.

Pay attention to soil pH. We often spend a lot of time talking about fertilizer and the need to use soil test results to determine fertilizer needs. But pH is just as important as the phosphate and potash levels in your soil. The pH level of your soil will influence the availability of soil nutrients to the plant. You would like to keep your pH above 6.0, hopefully approaching 6.5. We can't alter the pH level quickly, so look at soil test results and add lime to start the process of de-acidifying the soil. It may take 12 months for total effect.

These are just three examples of practices to consider how you did last year and how it could improve your operation this year. There are many more possibilities. Just think back about the good and bad of this past year. Let's repeat the good and change the bad for this next year. And make time to celebrate the blessings of your life with your family.