Managing Native Grass Forages

Patrick Keyser, Professor and Director, Center for Native Grasslands Management

Where Should I Start If I Want to Plant Native Grasses?

If you have given some thought to establishing a few acres of native grass forages on your farm but are wondering what the best strategy is to get started, here are some considerations that should be helpful. Really, there is just one strategy, but a number of scenarios where this strategy could play out. The strategy is really very simple: start where it will hurt the least and help the most! Or, put another way, start at the bottom and work your way up.

Maybe the best approach then, is start with the most marginal forage ground in your operation – places that are very wet, have low fertility soils, or are especially droughty. Such sites are likely not very productive for you anyway and may be the same ones that you have replanted time and again in the wake of droughts or floods. Maybe these are the same sites that are so darn good at growing broomsedge (aka, “sagegrass”)! Because these sites may be costing you more (especially if they have been replanted and failed) than they are producing, or simply are not producing at all, converting them sure makes a lot of sense. Too, since the establishment process will mean going a summer without any production from the site, if it has not been producing, or has been producing very poorly, there won’t be much to miss! Finally, it is sites like these where our widely-adapted native grasses can produce well, certainly much better than about any other option we have.

Another scenario, one very similar to the first, is to take advantage of odd areas, areas that simply have been let go and are out of production. For all the same reasons – they are not currently producing and going through the establishment cycle will not cause you to lose any production. These are very low risk areas to try a new forage tool. Another version of this scenario is on new ground, sites that have recently been cleared of trees. Since there has not been any forage being produced at all, and you have to clean the site up and plant it anyway, the marginal increase in effort to try natives is really very low. Too, these sites tend to have minimal weed pressure and consequently, can be good places to get natives up and growing. All of this applies very well to ground that has been in row crops and you have decided to move back into forage production. Weed pressure will have been reduced (but watch out for glyphosate resistant weeds), marginal costs in terms of inputs and effort will be small, and the impact on forage availability during establishment will be limited.

The last scenario is to consider fields that need to be renovated regardless of what forage species you plant. You will already be incurring expenses for weed control, killing of degraded, low quality sods, buying seed, planting, and going without any meaningful production for a period of time. This renovation cycle is a perfect opportunity to diversify your forage base by planting a warm-season perennial, one that has proven to be very cost-effective.

Any one of the above scenarios allows you to minimize the marginal costs of shifting a few acres into native grass forages. It is also an opportunity to maximize the return on your investment by improving on unproductive or marginal sites. If it works out for you, you can always add more native grasses at some point in the future when a good opportunity presents itself. For more information, please take a look at the Native Grass College course, Establishment 101 (http://nativegrasses.utk.edu/curricula.htm) and the other resources at that site.