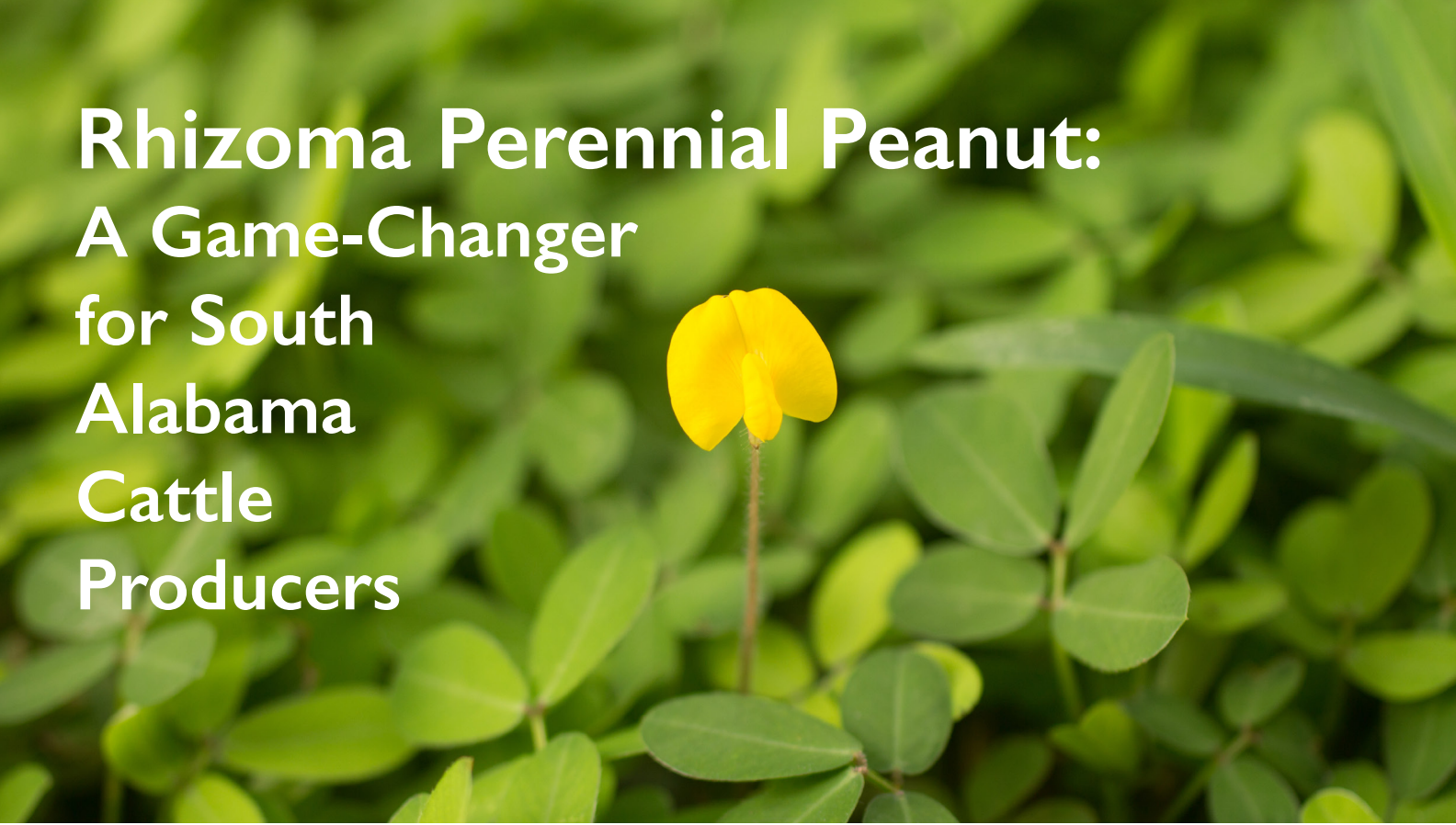


# Rhizoma Perennial Peanut: A Game-Changer for South Alabama Cattle Producers



Leanne Dillard, PhD

Associate Professor/Extension Specialist, Forage Systems, Auburn University

**R**hizoma perennial peanut (RPP), often referred to as the “alfalfa of the South,” is gaining traction as a valuable forage option for Alabama cattle producers. With its high-quality forage, resilience to drought, and ability to thrive in sandy soils, RPP offers significant benefits for livestock operations across the state. Here, we explore its establishment, variety selection, grazing management, and hay production to help Alabama producers make the most of this perennial legume. Current recommendations are to only plant RPP in South Alabama, but current work is being done as far north as Clanton to determine the winter survivability of RPP in more northern latitudes.

## Establishing Rhizoma Perennial Peanut in Alabama

Establishing RPP requires careful planning and management, as it is a slow-establishing crop with specific soil and climate requirements. Alabama’s sandy and well-drained soils, particularly in the Coastal Plain region, provide an ideal environment for RPP. However, establishment in heavy clay or poorly drained soils is not recommended. Start by selecting a site with well-drained, sandy soils and full sun exposure. Conduct a soil test to determine nutrient levels and soil pH. While RPP thrives in moderately acidic soils, a pH range of 5.8 to 6.5 is optimal. Lime and fertilize based on soil test recommendations, ensuring the site is free of weeds and other competitive vegetation.

Proper land preparation is crucial. A clean, smooth seedbed facilitates planting and reduces weed competition during establishment. Mechanical preparation, such as disking and leveling, is often necessary.

## Planting Rhizomes

RPP is propagated using rhizomes rather than seeds. The recommended planting window in Alabama is late winter to early spring, from February through May, depending on local conditions. Plant rhizomes at a depth of 2 to 3 inches, with row spacings of 2 to 3 feet. Approximately 1,000 to 2,000 pounds of rhizomes per acre are needed for optimal establishment.

Adequate moisture is essential during establishment. While irrigation can improve establishment success, timely rainfall can also suffice. Weed control is critical during the first year, as RPP seedlings are slow-growing and susceptible to competition. Mowing or using herbicides labeled for RPP can help manage weeds.

## Choosing the Right Varieties

There are several varieties that are suggested for South Alabama. Each has distinct characteristics suited to different management goals.

- ‘Florigraze’ is the most planted variety and can be

used for both hay production and grazing management.

- **'Arbrook'** is a more upright-growing variety but is less tolerant than 'Florigraze' to grazing, cold weather, and heavy soils; therefore, it is primarily used for hay production.
- **'UF Tito'** has a taller and less dense canopy, which favors hay production.
- **'Chico'** has a dense and short canopy favoring grazing management.

These varieties perform well under proper management and are recommended for Alabama producers interested in high-quality forage.

### Grazing Management

RPP can be an excellent grazing resource, but proper management is essential to maintain its productivity and longevity. Since RPP establishes slowly, avoid grazing during the establishment year. Once fully established, rotational grazing is the preferred method to optimize forage utilization and protect plant stands.

### Key Grazing Tips:

1. **Stocking Rate:** Use moderate stocking rates to prevent overgrazing, especially during the early stages of grazing.
2. **Grazing Height:** Maintain a residual stubble height of 3 to 4 inches to encourage regrowth and protect rhizomes.
3. **Rest Periods:** Allow 4 to 6 weeks of rest between grazing events to enable plants to recover and maintain their vigor.

RPP provides excellent forage quality, with crude protein levels often exceeding 15% and digestibility comparable to alfalfa. These characteristics make it ideal for supplementing cattle diets, especially during periods of low forage availability.

### Hay Management

In addition to grazing, RPP is highly valued for its premium-quality hay. Proper hay management can maximize yields and ensure high nutritional value. Harvest RPP hay at 6 to 8 weeks of regrowth, just before or at early bloom, to capture the highest forage quality. Delaying harvest reduces forage quality as the plants mature. Cut RPP at a height of 2 to 4 inches to encourage regrowth. Because RPP has a lower moisture content than other forages, it dries relatively quickly in the field, reducing the risk of weather-related losses. However, proper curing and baling techniques are essential to maintain forage quality. Store RPP hay in a dry, covered area to protect it from moisture and maintain its nutritional value. Producers can market RPP hay as a premium product, especially to horse owners or livestock operations seeking high-quality forage.

### Benefits of Rhizoma Perennial Peanut for Alabama Producers

Incorporating RPP into cattle operations offers several advantages:

- **Reduced Input Costs:** As a legume, RPP fixes atmospheric nitrogen, reducing the need for nitrogen fertilizer.
- **Drought Tolerance:** RPP's deep root system allows it to withstand dry conditions, making it a reliable forage option during Alabama's hot summers.
- **Forage Quality:** With high crude protein and digestibility, RPP provides excellent nutrition for livestock.
- **Longevity:** Properly managed RPP stands can persist for decades, offering long-term returns on establishment investments.

### Challenges and Considerations

Despite its benefits, RPP does come with challenges. Its slow establishment period requires patience and diligent management. Additionally, initial establishment costs, including rhizome procurement and planting, can be high. However, these costs are often offset by reduced fertilizer needs and long-term productivity.

Rhizoma perennial peanut is a versatile and valuable forage option for Alabama cattle producers. Whether used for grazing, hay production, or both, its high-quality forage and resilience make it an excellent investment for long-term profitability. By following best practices for establishment, variety selection, grazing management, and hay production, producers can unlock the full potential of this "alfalfa of the South" and enhance their operations.

The Animal Science and Forage Extension team will be highlighting RPP and many other research and demonstration projects during the 2025 Beef and Forage Field Days

Location	Date
Gulf Coast Research & Extension Center (Fairhope)	March 7
Wiregrass Research & Extension Center (Headland)	March 14
Tennessee Valley Research & Extension Center (Belle Mina)	April 3
Chilton Research & Extension Center (Clanton)	April 16
E.V. Smith Research & Extension Center	May 3
Black Belt Research & Extension Center	October 17

For more information on RPP or the upcoming 2025 Beef and Forage Field Days contact your local Animal Science or Forage REA or visit [www.alabamaforages.com](http://www.alabamaforages.com).



*This article is furnished as a producer-directed goal of the Alabama State Checkoff. For more information on how beef checkoff dollars are working for you, contact the Alabama Cattlemen's Association at 334-265-1867 or visit our website at [www.bamabeef.org](http://www.bamabeef.org).*