



Selecting the Right Cool-Season Annual

Leanne Dillard, Ph.D., Extension Forage Specialist

In September and October of each year, producers plant thousands of acres of annual cool-season forages across Alabama. This provides winter grazing and reduces the hay and supplement needed for your cattle herd. Whether you are overseeding a bahiagrass or bermudagrass field or using a prepared seedbed for planting, selecting the right species and variety for your farm is crucial to your springtime success.

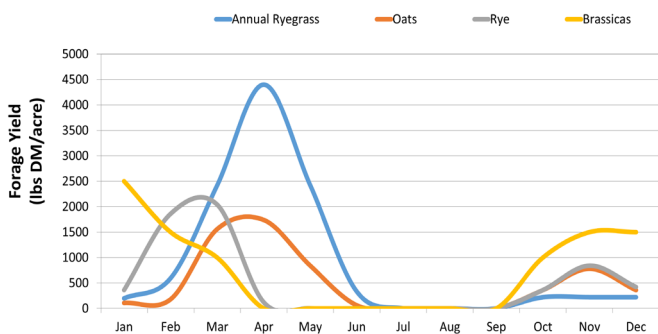
1. Use a mixture of cool-season annual forage species to extend the growing season

Annual ryegrass is one of the most versatile forages we can grow in Alabama, but even it is not perfect. To extend the growing season, the addition of a small grain, legume or forb can be beneficial. Annual ryegrass grows well from mid-March through early May. By adding oat,

wheat, or cereal rye you can extend that season into early February or even late January in some cases. Use of crimson or ball clover, vetch, winter peas, or other annual legumes will also extend the growing season and provide some 'free' nitrogen to the system and these forages are high in crude protein and have a greater digestibility than grasses. The last option is a forb, typically a brassica or chicory. These can help scavenge nutrients from previous crops, break hard pans, and break plant disease cycles. Similar to legumes, they are high in crude protein and are more digestible than annual grasses.

The use of 2 species within the same class of forage (i.e., grass, legume, or forb) can also be beneficial. In research at the Wiregrass Research and Extension Center in Headland, we have been successful with a mixture that includes both oat and cereal rye. In this case, the oat is

more palatable to the cattle and slower maturing, while the cereal rye is more cold tolerant and grows better earlier in the season. There are endless possibilities of mixtures that are possible. The graph below shows the growth curves of a mixture that includes annual ryegrass, cereal rye, oat, crimson clover, and turnip grown South Alabama.



2. Select the best variety for your farm goals and location

There are many varieties of annual ryegrass, small grains, legumes, and forbs on the market. Selecting the best variety for each situation can be intimidating. For annual ryegrass and small grains, Auburn University conducts a variety test at multiple locations throughout the state each year. While they do not include every variety on the market, they are open to any company that would like to participate. In August of each year, Extension specialists and research faculty from AU, UGA, and UF meet to compare trials from each state to summarize and release the recommended varieties for the tri-state region. To be recommended, the variety has to have performance data going back at least 3 years. These results are a good place to start determining which variety would be best for your soil type and climatic conditions. The 2023 Cool-season Annual Forage Variety Recommendations can be found at www.alabamaforages.com or visit the Auburn University Forage Variety Testing website at www.aes.auburn.edu/variety-tests. All recommended varieties are commercially available, but may not be available at your local feed store. If you have trouble locating a specific variety, reach out to your local Extension office. Currently there are not any Alabama variety trials for annual legumes or forbs. However, we use them routinely in demonstrations and research projects across the state. Reach out to your

local Extension office or visit www.alabamaforages.com for more information on evaluating these forage species and varieties.

When selecting a mixture, also consider using 2 varieties of the same species of forage. For example, there are several early maturing annual ryegrasses on the market. These can be used with a later maturing variety to extend the annual ryegrass growing season. You may also select to use the early variety over the later in an overseeding system, when the later annual ryegrass can interfere with spring greenup of bahiagrass and bermudagrass.

3. Good establishment practices

The last step in ensuring a lush field this spring is following proper establishment practices. Planting date, seeding rate and depth, and soil fertility all play an important role in proper establishment. Recommended planting dates are mid-September through mid-October for most of the state. While later plantings can be successful, the early freeze last December was a good reminder of why it is recommended to plant earlier in the fall if possible. Fields that were established during the recommended window were damaged but not killed, while many fields that were planted in November had complete winterkill because the forages had not fully established.

Seeding rate recommendations vary based on species, number of species in the mixture, and sowing method. The Alabama Forage Handbook includes seeding rates for the most common forages species grown in Alabama. This handbook can be found online at our website or a hard copy can be found at your local Extension office. Seeding depth is one of the major causes of stand failure. Legumes and forbs, in particular cannot handle planting depths over 1/4". Make sure to calibrate drill or broadcast seeder to ensure accurate rate and depth.

While I mention this in most of my articles, proper soil fertility and pH is of the utmost importance. Soil sampling is relatively easy and cost-effective (\$10 at the AU soil testing laboratory) and will provide important information on lime and nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium needs. Applying a small amount of starter fertilizer and then 2 spring applications will keep your cool-season annual forages strong throughout the spring growing season.



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.