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**Crabgrass as Forage**

My first interaction with crabgrass was as a young boy pulling this grass from the garden. At that point in time it seemed like the most aggressive and annoying weed out there, but I’ve come to view it as a potentially excellent forage resource for livestock. Crabgrass is an annual, warm-season grass that is fast growing, easy to establish, and capable of natural and prolific reseeding, all of which allows it to excel as a “weed” but can provide feed as well.

Crabgrass was originally used in Europe as fodder before being introduced into the United States in the middle 19th century, as a forage for grazing livestock. During the past 30 years or so, there has been an enormous change in the perception of crabgrass with forage and livestock producers. It is now considered a legitimate forage crop. The Noble Research Institute released a developed cultivar for use as warm-season annual grass forage called Red River. This cultivar has become widely popular and given legitimacy to crabgrass as a forage crop. Other cultivars have been developed since.

These improved crabgrass varieties are not weeds’ but high-producing, high-quality forages that are broadly adapted. The nutritive value of crabgrass is often superior to other warm-season forage options during summer for both haying and grazing. Forage crabgrass has high crude protein (8-14%) and high digestibility, which promotes average daily gains of livestock that can easily reach two pounds per head per day. It is also an excellent choice in many double-cropping systems, especially with winter annual forages like wheat, to extend the grazing period.

Crabgrass is widely adapted and can be used in both till and no-till forage production systems and is often managed in many livestock grazing operations as a reseeding crop, thereby reducing the cost of seed and other annual costs. In addition, crabgrass can also be used as a component in warm-season annual and perennial forage systems. It is particularly productive in dryland situations, but it also performs well under irrigation and across a range of soil pH levels (5 to 7.5). It can be used for silage or hay production and is an excellent choice for conservation purposes. It covers critical areas quickly due to its rapid growth and establishment.

For best results, plant crabgrass mid-spring to early summer for the best forage production. Since yield is dependent on rainfall, avoid planting after mid-summer. Seeding rates should range from 2 to 4 pounds of pure live seed per acre and planting depth should not be more than 1/2-inch deep. Adequate fertility must be provided for improved forages to be successful, and crabgrass is no exception. Always soil test and apply nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium accordingly.

Crabgrass works well when planted following small grains such as cereal rye, triticale or wheat. The small grains provide forage for late fall into spring and the crabgrass fills in during the summer and early fall to provide high-quality forage. Light tillage is recommended when the cereal forage is done being grazed or harvested in the spring. This improves seed germination and promotes better volunteer crabgrass stands for the summer.

In the summer, begin grazing crabgrass stands when plants are 4 to 6 inches tall, which typically occurs 30-40 days after seedling emergence. For hay production, cut crabgrass pastures in the boot to heading stage (normally 18 to 24 inches high), which will allow for at least two harvests per year. Regrowth is supported by remaining leaves and not by stored root and crown reserves, so avoid cutting crabgrass pastures lower than 3 inches.

If your focus is filling the forage gap in the heat of summer and early fall, you might give crabgrass a try. This is a “weed” that can provide some high-quality tonnage with relatively low cost or input. To learn more about utilizing crabgrass reference the K-State Publication “Utilizing Crabgrass As A Forage” found in the Forage Facts notebook series in the K-State Bookstore.