“Now is the Time to Plant Cool Season Grasses”

Cool season perennial grasses such as tall fescue, timothy, and orchardgrass form the base of most forage programs in Tennessee. This is due to their persistence, productivity, and long growing seasons. Although these grasses are perennials, recent years of drought and increased weed pressure has led to many fields that may need reseeding. If you are looking to reseed your pasture with cool season perennials, September is a great month to do it.

When trying to establish a successful stand of any grass, getting the pH and nutrient levels in the soil to their desired levels is critical. A low pH, potash or phosphate level can result in slow seedling growth, leading to increased weed pressure. This can put the grass seedlings at a competitive disadvantage. Getting your soil tested is the best way to determine how much lime and fertilizer are needed. The University of Tennessee Extension office can assist with soil testing. Fertilizer can be applied at planting, but lime needs to be applied at least six months prior to seeding. This will allow time for the lime to raise the pH in the soil. Proper fertility is the first step in planting a grass pasture or hayfield.

To get the proper number of plants per acre, the proper number of seed must be planted. Unless you own your own drill and can be reasonably sure of the flow rate of seed, it is a good idea to spend a little time calibrating the drill. This will allow you to adjust the flow rate of the seed, insuring the proper amount of seed is planted. Seeding rates are 15-20 lbs/acre for tall fescue, 10-15 lbs/acre for orchardgrass, and 8 lbs/acre for timothy. Seeding depth is also important. Planting seeds too deep could result in poor seedling emergence, causing a poor stand. Cool-season perennial grasses should be planted approximately 1⁄2 inch deep.

A final suggestion for establishing these cool season grasses is to control weed pressure. This includes planting into a weed free environment so that the grass seedlings have an advantage in the establishment phase, and also minimizing weed pressure after establishment. Weeds compete with beneficial grasses for water, sunlight, and nutrients, so preventing and controlling them are critical. To limit weed problems, two things should be done. First, clean up any persistent weed problems in the field ahead of time. It is easier to kill weeds when there is no concern about young grass seedlings. Second, continuously evaluate the field during the first several months of seedling establishment. If weed problems develop, herbicides can still be used to kill many broadleaf weed species, although the options are more limited after the grass is planted. Contact the Extension office for herbicide recommendations that are specific to your situation.

Cool season perennials provide excellent forages for cattle and if properly managed can last for several years. Their high quality, production and long growing season make them ideal to use in livestock operations. To successfully establish and maintain these grasses, environmental conditions in the field need to be manipulated so the grasses have an advantage over undesirable plants. Soil testing, fertilizing and controlling weeds are important both before and after establishment. If you would like more information about establishing cool season grasses, stop by the UT Extension office inside the Burritt College Building or call us at (931) 946-2435.