

# Alfalfa Pasture Supplement For Beef Cattle?

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**A**lfagraze, the grazing-tolerant alfalfa variety developed by Dr. Joe Bouton at the University of Georgia, has made a big splash in the Upper South and the Midwest where farmers are planting it widely for dairy and stocker beef pasture and even for beef cows. In Georgia it has been largely ignored. Alfagraze has demonstrated that it holds up under grazing, unlike other alfalfa varieties. Grazing studies we have conducted with beef steers at the Central Georgia Station, Eatonton, have resulted in average daily gains of over 2 pounds/day from late March to September. This is great if you wish to stocker cattle but what about beef cows and calves?

Does Alfagraze alfalfa pasture have any use for beef cows and calves in Georgia? The normal thinking is that alfalfa is too high quality stuff for beef cows and calves and therefore a waste of money. However, in many important beef cattle states such as Nebraska, alfalfa is an important part of their diet. This suggests that maybe we better take another look at alfalfa.

Nutrient needs of a beef cow change greatly over the year. At calving, nutrient requirements of beef cows increase markedly for rebreeding and providing milk for calves. Another period of great need for high quality forage is in the last several months before weaning of the calf although nutrient needs of the cow are relatively low at this time. Supplementation of the cow and the calf during these critical periods can boost conception rates and weaning weights. The key to success is targeting quality forage for these animals at the right time. Joe Bouton started asking me, "Why can't alfalfa pasture or hay be used as a supplement for limited periods of time in cow-calf production?" The answer is that alfalfa can be used as a supplement. So, we started discussing practical ways for a beef cattle producer to use alfalfa. Research and demonstrations on this practice are underway at several locations in Georgia.

Let's do some simple calculations on alfalfa costs. Start with one 50 pound bag of Alfagraze alfalfa seed. This will plant

2 1/2 acres of pure stand Alfagraze and provide an average of 10 tons of alfalfa dry matter per year over the entire 2 1/2 acres. If you purchase 10 tons of alfalfa hay at \$120/ton = \$1200. Cost of establishing your 2 1/2 acres of Alfagraze = \$475 and maintenance cost/year = \$175. This is a pretty good return on your investment if you can utilize the alfalfa profitably as a protein/energy supplement for your cattle.

Beef cows maintained on grass pastures and some grass hay can intermittently have access to graze the 2 1/2-acre Alfagraze area during spring when they are lactating and breeding. Hay can be cut from the alfalfa in early summer to use as a supplement during late winter when cows are calving. In late summer and early fall prior to weaning, calves can be creep grazed on alfalfa. The key to making the system work is using the alfalfa pasture as a supplement when it is most needed by the animals and when grass pastures are not able to supply their needs.

If you are interested, here are guidelines for getting started with this Alfagraze system:

#### Establishing Alfagraze:

1. Select a well-drained area that is near or within your grass pasture.
2. Prepare a good seedbed with a turning or chisel plow and disking.
3. Lime and fertilize according to soil test recommendations for alfalfa (pH 6.5, high phosphorus and potassium, also boron).
4. Apply a premerger herbicide and smooth the seedbed.
5. Seed at the correct time of year. In south Georgia (below Macon) plant in the fall up to December 15. North of Macon, plant before November 1 or during March.
6. Plant Alfagraze seed (it is the only tested grazing-tolerant variety available) at 20 pounds/acre with a cultipack seeder. A grain drill can also be used if seed are drilled at a shallow depth (1/4 to 1/2 inch) after obtaining a firm seedbed with a cultipacker or roller.
7. Each year, refertilize and control weed or insect pests such as alfalfa weevil as needed.

#### Grazing Alfagraze:

1. Enclose the Alfagraze area with step-in electric fence and a gate opening.
  2. Open gate and allow cows access for limited periods of time during spring calving and breeding season. Can be grazed from late March if fall planted or from July if spring seeded.
  3. Before animals are turned on alfalfa the first time, be sure they have had access to plenty of hay and are not hungry. Feeding a bloat preventative (poloxolene) just prior to grazing is good insurance against bloat. Check cattle frequently for bloat during first days on alfalfa.
  4. Graze Alfagraze down to 2 to 3 inches, remove animals, and allow regrowth for 20 to 25 days.
  5. Repeat grazing cycle, or cut hay, or creep graze calves in late summer. Your option!
  6. Proper management of your Alfagraze stand should provide high value grazing for 4 to 5 years.
- Using Alfagraze alfalfa pasture as a supplement to grass pastures offers an opportunity to meet the nutritional needs of the cow and calf during critical periods. If managed properly, it is an easy system that should do the job at relatively low cost. Results of research and producer experience will help us better evaluate the potential of this system.

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