

News Column
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What are the benefits of forage sorghum?

With historic high cattle markets and less than impressive grain markets, I suspect there might be more acres of farm ground being planted into feedstuffs for cattle. One of the more popular feedstuffs is forage sorghum. Forage sorghum offers a variety of benefits as a feedstuff for livestock.

What are the benefits of forage sorghum?

Forage sorghums are versatile. They use less water than some of our other traditional forage crops and, when managed correctly, contain high-quality nutrients for cattle. Depending on your goals, forage sorghums can be grazed, hayed or put into silage. Once your goals are established you can select the sorghum type and variety to match your needs.

Sorghum types obviously have a better heat and drought tolerance than corn or alfalfa, and require less water than corn silage, making it a better option for our area with the unpredictability of precipitation.

What type of sorghum should I plant?

There are many sorghum types and each one possesses their own benefits. Brown midrib, or BMR, forage sorghum has been around for many years and is becoming increasingly popular. The brown midrib trait has between 20 to 50 percent less lignin content. Lignin is indigestible by the animal and protects plant fiber from being digested. With reduced lignin, there is better fiber digestibility and, increased energy content in the forage. On the down side, BMRs as a whole, yield about 10% less than non BMRs and tend to be less drought tolerant than non BMRs. With the decreased lignin content, BMR can have problems with standability as well.

Photoperiod-sensitive (PPS) forage sorghum is another type of sorghum available. It remains vegetative until day length decreases to less than 12.5 hours a day. It remains vegetative long into the growing season. PPS forage sorghum does not produce seeds in Kansas, which extends the harvest window for hay production. The advantage of this is it can produce high tonnage and provides a long window of opportunity for haying in the fall, because it will not be maturing. PPS forage sorghum is best suited for those interested in haying the crop, not for silage production.

For those interested in grazing, sorghum-sudan grass is a good option. It possesses great regrowth potential. Sorghum-sudan grasses tend to be a more drought tolerant and more tolerant of high pH soils than forage sorghum. On the down side, its feed quality is reduced later in the season.

To successfully raise forage sorghums for feed, a good nutrient management program is very important. Over-fertilizing with nitrogen can lead to high nitrate levels in the plant, possibly leaving it unsuitable for livestock.

Forage sorghums are a great option for a livestock feed source. However, they can accumulate nitrates and produce prussic acid, both of which are toxic to livestock. Therefore, forage testing for

those compounds is recommended before feeding, and while you are at you can test for protein as well, a service offered by Extension. This year K-State will have five variety testing sites across the state evaluating corn and sorghum silages, as well as sorghum and millet hay types. I am very excited about this as it will help us better serve you in your variety selection for these feedstuffs.