

Managing Native Grass Forages

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Warm-season Competition Control

As with any weed issues in a forage setting, the first – and most important – step is to ensure that native grasses are not stressed. Hay harvests that are too late (after Aug 25 or so), too frequent, or too short (<8 inch residual height), or overgrazing can all lead to stressed stands that are more vulnerable to weed encroachment. If you are seeing unacceptable levels of weed pressure, evaluate your canopy management to be sure you are not stressing the stand. With natives (like other forage grasses), it's all about maintaining a vigorous canopy.

A second consideration is fertility management. Native grasses (except eastern gamagrass) use only modest levels of nitrogen (about 60 units per acre) and only require phosphorous and potash when soil tests reflect levels below "Medium". Using higher levels leads only to excess nutrients in the soil that allow weeds to become more competitive.

Annual summer grasses are usually not a problem in established native grass stands because they typically cannot compete with the earlier starting (April vs. May or June) and much larger perennials. In the case of crabgrass, many producers have no complaints when it fills in gaps in the stand. Less desirable annuals such as foxtails, fall panicgrass, and signalgrass can be controlled with imazapic products (Plateau® or Panoramic®) in bluestem or indiagrass stands. Perennial warm-season grasses such as dallisgrass (imazapic) and johnsongrass (imazapic or sulfosulfuron [Outrider®]) can also be controlled by spraying.

Common bermudagrass, on the other hand, can become a serious problem. Cattle prefer the natives and because they do not graze the bermudagrass within native pastures, it will continue to spread. There are no herbicides that can be used on bermudagrass that will control it without damaging the natives as well. Keeping it out of the stand with good establishment practices and maintenance of vigorous native grasses are the best approaches. Reduced nitrogen inputs can also favor the less nutrient-demanding natives.

Broadleaf weeds such as perilla mint, pigweeds, and horsenettle can be effectively controlled with standard formulations used on other forage grasses. This includes 2,4-D, dicamba, and aminopyralid products. Products containing metsulfuron (Cimarron Plus®) and sulfosulfuron can also be used on native grasses.

More palatable weeds such as johnsongrass and immature ragweed can be controlled through grazing. Good management is the first step to reducing warm-season weed problems in native grasses. Left uncontrolled, they can weaken a native grass stand and reduce its vigor and production. For more information, see UT Extension publication SP731-F (*Competition Control in Native Warm-season Grasses Grown for Livestock Forage in the Mid-South*) available at

<https://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Pages/foragesLivestock.aspx> or <http://nativegrasses.utk.edu/publications/default.htm>.