

**Extending the Grazing Season**  
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Grass is an amazing crop. Even with the extremely wet conditions early in the growing season, followed by drought conditions though the majority of the summer, the stuff keeps growing. Although we experienced reduced growth due to the cool damp spring and next to no summer growth, we were able to get through the grazing season with only 35 days of providing supplemental feed to the beef cow herd. Here it is December and we are still grazing. What an amazing crop!

As noted by many "experts," winter-feed is the most expensive component to annual cow cost. While there are many factors (conception rates, weaning weights, genetics, etc.) we can influence to help decrease annual cow costs, the one we can change in order to have an immediate impact is reducing the winter feed bill. The cheapest and easiest way to accomplish this goal is to keep that cow grazing and keep the tractor parked in the barn.

We need to have the mindset of grazing at least 10 months, if not more, every year. In Indiana, we are blessed to have an abundance of feedstuffs available to the cowherd. Looking beyond our perennial cool season pastures that provide feed during the "normal" grazing season, we need to think about utilizing all the feed that is wasted behind the combine. Cornstalks make a great feed for cows in the fall of the year. It is not uncommon for 1 acre of stalks to feed a cow for 30 days or better. If your normal grass grazing season is 7 months, stalks are an easy way to get to 8 months of grazing. Add some stockpiled tall fescue and WOW we are up to 9 months of grazing already.

So what can be done to eke out another month or two of grazing? A recent trip to Southern Illinois helped to answer this question. With the help of University of Illinois Livestock Systems Specialist, Ed Ballard, Illinois producers are successfully using a blend of winter annuals to fill this void.

Cattlemen are using a blend of grazing turnips, cereal rye, and spring oats to extend their grazing season. Ballard has measured this blend of forage to have up to 10,000 pounds of dry matter per acre and a relative feed value of well over 100. This mix is often broadcast seeded by airplane into a standing corn crop. The mix has also been successfully no-till drilled behind wheat, oats, soybeans, or corn chopped for silage. According to Ballard, for the most growth, seeding should be done in mid to late August, but a good stand is possible even seeding up to late September.

On October 30, 2002, a group of Indiana graziers went to see first hand how this might work on their own operations. At one stop, we strolled into a 40-acre field that was knee-high in turnips and oats. The rye was there but only 6 to 8 inches tall. This producer planned to turn 50 cow/calf pairs into the field when his cornstalks ran out. Based on previous experience, he figured he would have 45 to 55 days of feed. When the winter annuals ran out, he had 30 to 40 days worth of stockpiled fescue waiting for those cows. This producer was well on his way to 2003 before any stored feed may be fed to his cows.

While grazing the turnips, cattle would eat the tops and turnip bulbs. According to Ballard, the tops are very high in protein and the bulbs are very energy dense. He also commented that cattle take a day or two to adjust to eating the turnips, but then they eat them like candy. During a University of Illinois trial, the cows would leave alfalfa hay and graze down through 12 to 15 inches of snow to eat the still-standing, green turnip tops.

The true benefit of the rye comes into play the following spring. The rye will start to grow sooner than anything else does in the spring. With that in mind, it is possible to take off a week or two of hay feeding in the spring of the year. With the addition of nitrogen fertilizer on the rye, Illinois cattlemen have been able to shave off another 7 to 14 days of winter-feed.

What is the cost? \$15 to \$18 for seed, \$8 to \$10 for broadcasting, throw in some miscellaneous other costs and this comes to \$0.45 to \$0.55 per cow per day. Compare this to well over a \$1 for hay and supplement; it is easy to see the cost savings!

While there are many things that affect the profitability of a beef operation, the winter feed bill could be the biggest. Extending the grazing season by utilizing winter annuals, crop residues and stockpiled fescue, it is not impossible to turn a 120-day winter-feeding period into a 45 day or less feeding period. Based on comments from Indiana producers that went on the trip, tourists driving through southern Indiana may be surprised to see acres and acres of turnips