

Lessons Learned from a Forage Plots

You may not know that Lane AgriPark is more than an Extension office, livestock arena, and Community Center. We are also the home of numerous plant demonstrations created and maintained to provide opportunity for folks to see, touch, and smell plant cultivars and varieties they may not have seen previously in Rutherford County growing conditions. These demonstrations also showcase various management techniques and strategies, provide hands-on learning opportunities for the public, and are where applied research is conducted in Rutherford County.



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In 2024, livestock forage plots were added to our property. When I established these plots, I had no idea of the rich learning experiences I would enjoy. What I've learned:

1. Farming is hard work and often takes place in extreme weather conditions. Unlike astronauts who walk on the moon in temperature-controlled space suits to keep them reasonably comfortable, farmers are stuck with layering (or unlayering) clothing to regulate temperature with limited success—and we won't even talk about rain, snow or sleet's effects. The work is often physical and the work is often dirty. In fact when folks call the office to inquire about beginning a career in agriculture, my first question is, "How hard to you want to work?" None of it's easy, but some things are easier than others.
2. Success or failure depends not only on the effort of the grower, but factors which are totally outside a person's control. Our demonstrations are used as learning laboratories and that they are—but unlike a laboratory where the environment is controlled, we cannot control the temperature and we can't control rainfall although irrigation, when available, helps. I can perfectly follow every recommended management practice regarding a crop, but if the weather doesn't cooperate by providing what the plants need when they need it, the results are...well, disappointing.
3. Rain is required. It's humbling to be reminded that I can't make it rain. In homes we turn on the faucet and water appears as if magic. It can make us feel more powerful than we really are. All plants require certain temperatures and certain amounts of rainfall.

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4. Plants are amazingly diverse. It is almost mind-boggling to consider the diversity of plants available to us. Management power is discovered when an individual can properly identify these plants, understand the associated lifecycle and plant benefits (or lack of). Then one is armed to use those plants to the advantage of their livestock.

5. It's risky. As a co-worker reminded me, if it weren't for about 6 inches of soil and adequate rainfall, all of us would starve.

Truly spoken, all flesh is grass. The Bible tells us this. In part of a speech originally printed in the Kansas Magazine in 1872, Senator John James Ingalls from Kansas said:

The primary form of food is grass. Grass feeds the ox; the ox nourishes man; man dies and goes to grass again; and so the tide of life, with everlasting repetition, in continuous circles, moves endlessly on and upward, and in more senses than one, all flesh is grass.

Consider for a moment the wonder of a world capable of growing grass which feeds animals that in turn feed us through milk and meat. These animals also provide fiber for our clothing. All this from grass. Truly, all flesh is grass.

Questions about grass? Please call your local Rutherford County UT/TSU Extension office at 615-898-7710 or visit our website at rutherford.tennessee.edu.