

Establishment of Clover in Fescue by "Trampling"

by Dr. Don Ball, Extension Agronomist/Alumni Professor, Department of Agronomy and Soils, Auburn University, AL 36849

Most cattlemen spend lots of time working for their cattle, but it never occurs to them that it might be possible to put their cattle to work for them. Extension demonstrations conducted in various counties have dramatically proven that a technique commonly referred to as the "trampling" or "walk-in" method of clover establishment can be successfully used in Alabama.

The trampling technique is simple, but experience has shown that a definite sequence of events must occur in order for it to be successful. These steps, along with some explanation as to why they are important, are as follows.

1. A fescue pasture area should be selected that is suited to growing white clover or red clover (this technique is less likely to work in areas dominated by weeds or by warm season grasses). Extremely wet areas should be avoided. The field should be small enough that several head of cattle per acre can be concentrated within it. If the grass stand is weak in the area to be seeded, the chances of obtaining a good clover stand are further increased.
2. Phosphorous, potassium, and lime should be applied in autumn or early winter according to soil test recommendations. However, nitrogen should not be applied to the pasture within 3 months before seeding, otherwise grass growth may crowd out the clover.
3. The field should be grazed or clipped closely prior to seeding. This ensures that the seed will reach the soil and provides a "head start" on reducing grass competition for the clover seedlings.
4. About 2-4 pounds/acre of properly inoculated white (or ladino) clover seed or 5-10 pounds/acre of red clover seed should be broadcast during January or February. By seeding during winter, insect problems that sometimes hurt autumn plantings are avoided.
5. The pasture should then be stocked heavily with cattle for several weeks. **THIS STEP IS VERY IMPORTANT.** The cattle trample the clover seed into the soil surface (which should be soft at this time of the year) and also weaken and suppress the grass enough to give the clover seedlings a chance to become established. If only a portion of a field is seeded, the cattle can be further concentrated by feeding hay in the seeded area.

6. Once the clover is 3-4 inches high, the pasture should either be clipped periodically or grazed closely enough that the clover is not shaded out by the grass. (White clover thrives best in pastures which are grazed closely; red clover tolerates grazing fairly well, but needs periodic rest for best results.) Soil fertility and pH should be maintained in accordance with recommendations from annual soil tests.

This simple, inexpensive method of clover establishment has potential for increasing the productivity of several hundred thousand acres of fescue pasture in Alabama . The technique is particularly well-suited to be used by cattlemen who have relatively small herds and small pastures and who can easily concentrate their cattle.

Although the trampling technique is somewhat less dependable than other clover establishment methods, it offers several advantages: (1) it is a practical approach that is easy to understand and use; (2) it does not require specialized equipment; (3) it is done at a time of the year when there are relatively few demands on a cattleman's time; and (4) the cost is so low that a cattleman can afford a higher-than-normal failure rate on clover establishment.