Planning a “Forage Sequence” implies that a stockman provides nutritious and palatable forage crops for grazing for as many days of the year possible. Cool season perennial grasses and legumes give Kentucky forage growers an competitive advantage over those in many other states. That advantage declines during the heat of our summers, however. Providing a solution to our “Summer Slump” is a challenge to stockmen throughout the South. This “Summer Slump” is the result of low yield of cool season forages during the heat and drier conditions of July, August and September. Another factor hindering livestock gains is the fescue endophyte which affects heat tolerance and gains in cattle.

It is to the advantage of stockmen to provide alternative forages during the heat of summer. Summer annuals and native perennial grasses provide alternatives. A better alternative, in my opinion is a mixture of alfalfa and orchardgrass.

Why Alfalfa? There are a number of advantages, higher quality nutrition being one. Secondly, alfalfa provides options for its use: hay, haylage and grazing. Alfalfa has a very deep root system which allows it to grow well even in drought situations. Alfalfa is a legume which allows it to produce its own nitrogen, benefiting both the alfalfa and the orchardgrass. This is a valuable benefit with today’s high nitrogen prices. Alfalfa’s typical stand life is more than twice as long as that of red clover. These are all good reasons to plant and graze alfalfa/grass mixtures.

When would you graze alfalfa? The last week of April through the 15th of September provide the primary grazing season for alfalfa. After allowing the crop to replenish its nutrient reserves from September 15 until November 1 (or 24º F. whichever comes first) grazing can be completed for the season. Since early May offers abundant forages other that alfalfa, I normally harvest the first cutting of alfalfa/orchardgrass as balage for winter use. We graze most fields the rest of the summer.

We plan a year ahead for new establishments. A soil test is the first step. Soil pH should be >6.5. Phosphorus and potash should be at adequate levels. Applying needed lime or nutrients should be done well ahead of seeding. Secondly, I select the alfalfa and the orchardgrass variety by utilizing the UK variety trial results. I use productive, grazing tolerant varieties. I prefer the orchardgrass to be a late maturing one.
Controlling competing vegetation is the next consideration. If I am planting into an existing sod, such as fescue, a non selective herbicide such as Roundup applied the previous September has given very good control. This is a great way to convert fescue into a much more productive crop. Sometimes a second application in March is also necessary. If you follow a row crop, a spring application only would be needed. I try to wait at least ten days after applying Roundup before planting alfalfa.

I aim to plant during the first week of April. Using a no-till drill set to plant no move that ½ inch deep has given very good results. You should be able to see a few seed on top of the ground behind the drill if your seed depth is correctly set. My planned seeding rate is 16-18 pounds of alfalfa and 6-8 pounds of orchardgrass. Most Kentucky springs provide moisture adequate to insure germination. The best managers recommend that the alfalfa bloom before it is harvested for the first time. Harvest could be for hay or grazing.

In the past I have proven to myself that alfalfa will not tolerate continuous grazing pressure. Now I utilize Management Intensive (or Rotational) Grazing to harvest the crop. I try to move our heifers after they have harvested the alfalfa but before they have been on the paddock for a week. By using temporary electric fencing and portable water tubs, we can create the smaller paddocks necessary to get the crop harvested. We then move the heifers to the next paddock and provide a needed recovery period of about four weeks.

In managing an alfalfa grazing plan, there can be several potential problems. These are manageable, however. The first problem that many would mention is bloat. In raising about two thousand dairy heifers, I have lost two to bloat. These both were on fescue pasture at the time. I have lost none while grazing alfalfa. Planting grass with the alfalfa can increase production as well as decreasing bloat potential. When introducing cattle to alfalfa for the first time, it might be well to limit the first grazing to several hours to allow them to become acclimated. Do not expose hungry cattle to lush alfalfa. Grazing when the crop is wet with dew is not a good idea. There are several supplements which limit bloat; one is Bloat-Guard, the other is Rumensin. Rumensin needs daily intake to be most effective. In my experience, the fear of bloat prevents many from enjoying the many benefits of the “Queen of Forage Crops”.

Grazing alfalfa can also have a detrimental effect on the udders of mid to late gestation dairy heifers. We have seen some flushing of udders in heifers in this stage of growth. Other forage sources are used for these heifers.

Our heifers return 70+ percent of their nutrients to the soil in the form of urine and manure. This is very beneficial in today’s environment of high priced fertilizer. We do soil samples annually to insure that fertility is not a limiting factor. We apply Boron every other year.

Grazing alfalfa has allowed us to defeat the “Summer Slump” while providing a highly nutritious forage for our heifers. By harvesting via grazing, we can avoid the
stress of cutting, drying and baling hay during the frequently rainy weather of Kentucky summers. Our heifers continue to gain well through the heat of summer ensuring that they meet their weight goals.

In summary, alfalfa provides numerous advantages to the grazier. It can provide the highest quality forage of any available crop in our climate. Alfalfa can be harvested in several ways, also. It can be grazed or cut for hay or haylage. It can, therefore, provide quality forage spring, summer, fall and winter. In “the fescue belt” alfalfa can provide a bridge to supply a good forage option during the “summer slump” when our cool season grasses are apt to go dormant. Alfalfa is a perennial and can provide forage for four or more years. Then, when it is time to retire an alfalfa stand, it can provide nitrogen credits to the next crop.

I challenge each of you to take advantage of alfalfa’s many grazing benefits. I think that you will find, as I have, that good grazing equals good profits.