

# DO AS I SAY — AND DO



## Alabama extension agent practices what he preaches.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

**W**hen Alex Tigie gives advice to a producer, he's not just quoting from the book. More than likely, the Alabama Cooperative Extension regional agent for animal science and forages has given the practice a test drive at home.

"We call this the Auburn Experiment Station," jokes Eddie Tigie, Alex's father and actual owner of the Dutton, Ala., commercial operation.

Alex and Eddie have tough criteria. While they are more than willing to experiment, before an idea becomes standard practice it has to be cost-effective; good for the cattle, forage and land; and time-friendly. Eddie works full-time for the Jackson County municipal water system and is

heavily involved in volunteer rescue work. Alex lives and works almost four hours from the Northeast Alabama farm, plus, he's finishing up his doctorate in addition to working full-time.

Here is a list of forage-centered practices that have passed the Tigie test:

### Stockpiling fescue

"Our entire forage system centers around stockpiling fescue," says Alex. "When we're

grazing in April, we're already thinking about stockpiling."

The father-son duo starts the process in mid-August by allowing their 25 mama cows to graze the fescue down close, then fertilize it.

Alex estimates that 80% of their fescue acres are truly stockpiled; the rest they'll graze if needed. They shoot for Nov. 1, and at that point the fescue is usually still growing a bit. In the meantime, the cows spend most of September and October on summer annuals.

Somewhere around Dec. 1-10,

the Tigues get serious about grazing the stockpile, which they try to let grow to 16 inches (in.) to 22 in. first.

"We start strip-grazing and try to get pretty good utilization on the pastures," says Alex.

Every couple of weeks, one of the Tigues takes a grazing stick and measures the forage height, then calculates how much forage mass they have and how much dry matter the cows need.

"We try to give them three to four days of forage and move them two to three times a week," says Alex.

He tries to set up the paddocks with temporary fence when he's home on weekends, then his dad moves the cows during the week.

"We let them graze it down to 4 inches, then move them. We don't

**"If it gets too short, it can cost you 10 days of growth."** — Alex Tigie



want them to hammer that grass,” says Alex. “We’ll back-fence and move it every three or four weeks, especially on the stockpile we start grazing early in the season.”

He says they’ll put 25 cow-calf pairs, or around 50,000 pounds (lb.) of cattle on one-tenth acre.

“That works out to 350,000 to 400,000 pounds an acre in a three-day window,” he notes.

“We don’t ask the cows to be 100% on fescue,” Alex emphasizes. “We use it like supplemental feed. It is 50% to 60% of their diet. The balance is dry hay we purchase.”

While the Tigues haven’t forage-tested their own stockpile, Alex says research shows stockpiled fescue tests at greater than 14% crude protein (CP) and 60% total digestible nutrients (TDN), enough for even their fall-calving cows.

The economics of purchasing hay vs. making their own is another practice they learned from Alex’s day job.

“We sold all our hay equipment,” he notes. “If you have less than 200 cows, it just isn’t economical.”

Plus, that means they can graze cattle on every inch of their 70 owned and leased acres.

Back to the stockpiled fescue, Alex says, “In a decent year we can stretch it out to Valentine’s Day, then start flash-grazing the winter annuals. Two years ago we grazed all winter. When conditions aren’t

as good, we’ll have to feed hay alone for 30 days.”

Whether it is stockpiled forage or hay, they keep a close eye on their cows to make sure they don’t lose body condition.

“We want our cows to be in good enough shape to breed back,” Eddie stresses.

### Summer annuals

“We have about 10 acres of warm-season annuals that we rotate back and forth with winter annuals,” says Alex. “We drill it in the existing sod with a rented or borrowed drill.”

Says Eddie: “It is more economical to rent rather than buy. Nobody uses a drill for summer forages, and it is pretty easy to get.”

They estimate the out-of-pocket costs for planting summer annuals is around \$60 per acre. They were planting both pearl millet and crabgrass. However, at least for now, they’re crossing pearl millet off the list.

The crabgrass works every year, but the pearl millet has been hit or miss, says Alex. “For what it costs, we need it to work every year.”



Eddie Tigues jokes about his farm being an Auburn research station since he and his son experiment with a number of practices.

He adds, “We try to drill the summer annuals in May, but it is dependent on rain. We don’t spray Roundup®. We try to graze it down. This past year the ryegrass was fighting the pearl millet because it had been cool and wet, but it came around.”

Eddie says, “It is always a balancing act — rain and forage production. You have to have something to fill the summer gap. Because of the endophyte issues

with tall fescue, we like to get them completely off of it in June and July.”

In June, the cows can graze volunteer Bermuda grass, and by July 4, the summer annuals are usually up and tall enough for grazing.

They typically wean in early summer, and Alex says, “If anybody gets feed, it is the calves.”

Adds Eddie: “We put them in the woods and feed them. Then we’ll turn them on high-quality grazing.”

They wait until the crabgrass is 8 in. to 10 in. tall before the first grazing.

“After that, if we have good rain, we struggle to rotate across it fast enough to keep it from

getting too mature,” says Alex. “For the first 45 to 60 days of grazing, it is hard to beat.”

They are also careful not to overgraze, he notes. “We don’t want them munching on the stems. It won’t come back.”

Eddie adds, “We try to leave 4 to 5 inches. If you let them stay one extra day, it is amazing how much it goes down.”

“If it gets too short, it can cost

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## Angus get the nod

While Alex and Eddie Tigues are always ready to experiment, when it comes to the genetics of their Angus-Simmental commercial herd, Angus sires remain a key part of the equation.

“We started buying Angus bulls in 2009 or 2010, and keep our own females,” says Alex.

“We buy bulls that produce moderate-framed cows with the maternal traits to produce females with adequate milk.”

He adds, “We’ve had such good luck with them. They do it all pretty well. They’re accepted at the stockyard and the feedyard.”

That also includes the end point. The last four years, the Tigues have sent their weaned, preconditioned calves to a Kansas feedyard through the Alabama Pasture to Rail Program. They get data back on both feedyard performance and carcass quality.

“The Angus-sired calves have done great,” says Alex. “We’re continuing to work toward faster, more efficient growth, more marbling and more CAB (*Certified Angus Beef*®) and Prime.”



The Tigues’ Angus-sired calves excel in the feedlot and at harvest.



you 10 days of growth,” says Alex.

“If it comes back at all,” adds Eddie.

With adequate rain, they’ll be able to move the cattle through the crabgrass three times a season, but even in dry years they manage two rotations.

“That’s the thing I struggle with in Extension,” adds Alex. “Every year is different.”

Toward the end of the summer annual season, before the cows move to stockpiled fescue, the Tigues temporarily abandon their rule about grazing too short and let the cattle graze down close so they can no-till in the winter annuals.

### Winter annuals

“Ideally we plant the winter annuals in late September,” says Alex, “But it is usually mid- to late October. When you plant early you get better growth.”

He says the high-quality cool-season annuals are a perfect match for their cows and calves.

“We use it to flush the cows, it gives them added nutrition in the winter,” Alex explains. “For a fall-calving system, the annuals do such a good job of matching the nutritional needs of the calves with

some of the highest-quality forage available. Plus, in the spring there is a lot of tonnage.”

He adds, “It is another tool in the toolbox to keep from having to feed as much hay. Any time we have to deliver hay to the cows, it means our forage system isn’t as good as it could be.”

The out-of-pocket costs for fertilizing and planting the cool-season annuals are around \$80 an acre, Alex estimates.

As for the type of winter annuals, every year is different, says Alex. “We did a big mix this year of ryegrass, rye, wheat and oats and also used some purple-top turnips.”

While the wheat and turnips are recent additions, Alex says from experience, “Cereal rye comes on early and is a little more cold-



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The hay rings on the Tigues farm don’t get much use, thanks to the innovative forage program Alex Tigues has helped put into practice on his father’s farm.

### For more information, see:

#### Grazing stick

To get a grazing stick, ask your local extension agent or check with your local USDA Natural Resource and Conservation Service office. If they don’t have one, they can probably point you in the right direction. Or, Alex Tigues says, you can use a yardstick and find articles online to help you convert inches to dry matter of forage.

#### Forage management

See Alabama Forages at [www.alabamaforages.com](http://www.alabamaforages.com).

but since we were able to protect our grass from overgrazing, we had grass when nobody else did.”

He emphasizes: “The real key to rotational grazing is to manage so the grass has time to rest, recover and regrow adequate forage mass.”

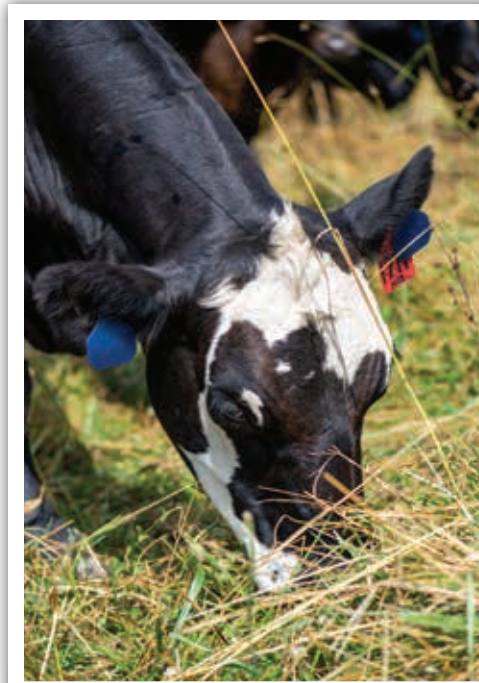
Since they started the frequent rotations, Eddie observes, “The cattle are calmer.”

For a herd that started with a bottle calf for Alex in 1995 and has grown along with Alex’s education and work experience, Eddie says, “We have a lot of trial and error, but we have a unique opportunity to try something new.” He adds, “Most people who start out with cattle late in life don’t have a Ph.D. guy to help.”

As for the soon-to-be Ph.D. guy, retired Auburn animal scientist Lisa Kriese-Anderson says it works both ways.

“Alex has taken what we say in extension and continued it on his Dad’s farm,” she says. “He’s always the first to show people you can do this as a small producer.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.



The Tigues raise their own replacement heifers and appreciate the maternal ability of Angus-influenced females.

tolerant, but it plays out really early. We’re lucky if we have it until early to mid-April. Then the oats come on, then the ryegrass. It will last on into May, and that’s about the time the fescue is really starting to come on, too.”

Like they do for summer annuals, the Tigues pay attention to forage height.

“We try for 6 to 8 to 10 inches of growth before we start grazing it,” says Alex. “By Valentine’s Day we hope to flash-graze it. We’ll let them graze for 24 to 48 hours, then give them dry hay for 48 to 72 hours. They bounce back and forth.”

The system works so well

they usually have extra forage in late spring, and buy anywhere from 20 to 30 head of stocker calves to make use of it.

### Rotational grazing

Six years ago, when Alex brought home the first polywire and temporary fence posts, Eddie was not impressed.

“I was hesitant, but rotational grazing is not that hard,” he says now. “You have to learn how to work with electric fence, but the cows get used to it. It only takes me 30 to 40 minutes every couple of days to move the fence and the cows. It is not as much trouble as I thought; it has worked really good.”

“2016 was the turning point,” says Alex. “We had a bad drought,