



Statesboro, Ga., producer Jimmy Blitch works at his forage program year-round.

*Closing in on*

# Year-Round Grazing

*Story & photos by*  
**BECKY MILLS**

One means of reducing annual feed costs is to reduce the cost of harvesting and then delivering harvested feedstuffs to the herd. A year-round grazing system could eliminate the costs associated with harvested feeds altogether.

Statesboro, Ga., producer Jimmy Blitch hasn't quite reached that goal, but he's close.

"In the late fall, we usually have to feed at least part of the cows from around the first of December until the first of February," Blitch says. But, if the weather cooperates, he will have some winter annuals even then for his replacement and first-calf heifers.

The cycle starts in the fall, when he encourages his commercial cows

to closely graze his Bahia grass pastures. "Around the 15th of October, we'll drill rye or wheat in and dribble clover on with a small grain seeder on the back of the no-till drill," he explains. "It also has a drag harrow behind it."

Blitch walks a fine line with his cattle and pasture management. While he wants the Bahia grass short enough for the no-till drill to be effective, he also wants three to five more days of grazing. "We'll leave the cattle on another three days if it is wet and five days if it is dry. They'll pack the clover in," he says.

He puts out 5 pounds (lb.) of clover an acre on first-year stands and 2-3 lb. every year on his other stands. The clover is planted along with 2 bushels (bu.) an acre of either wheat or rye. After he takes the cattle off, he applies a ton and a half of broiler litter an acre to the pastures.

"When we can graze varies a lot with the rain," Blitch says. "Sometimes we can graze the rye by the first of December, and the wheat can usually be grazed by the first of January. The clover is up by the first of February and lasts until mid-May. It comes in when the rye is starting to play out."

Blitch is an unabashed fan of clover. "My cattle breed back quicker and hold their condition better than they do just grazing

wheat or rye. Most of our calves are born in 45 days. I attribute a lot of that to the clover."

He adds, "We're getting some nitrogen fixation from the clover, probably around 60 to 90 pounds. That helps the Bahia grass. It usually is back out by April 15th." Nitrogen fixation or not, Blitch still applies 30 lb. of nitrogen an acre when the rye or wheat is around 3 inches (in.) tall. "Chicken manure is an undependable source of nitrogen," he says. "The nitrogen does the clover good on this sandy land. We have seen the clover start better when we put on the nitrogen."

"You have to fertilize those winter annuals to get anything from the grasses," says University of Georgia forage specialist John Andrae. "Even though the clover is fixing its own nitrogen, the total winter forage production is increased with inorganic fertilizer."

Blitch started using Apache arrowleaf clover two years ago. "It seems to give us more vigorous growth and better stands. We used to use Yuchi clover, but we couldn't depend on it. Some years we'd have it, other years we wouldn't."

Andrae agrees with Blitch's selection. "Apache arrowleaf clover is a great choice. It is a new variety from Texas A&M and has improved disease resistance over the other arrowleaf clovers. It has a lot of potential for the Southeast."

## Grazing flexibility

To help give his winter grazing even more flexibility, Blitch plants 250 acres of wheat or rye on cropland. "We drill the wheat or rye behind the peanuts or cotton," he says. "If we are planting behind peanuts, we'll try to plant around the first of October and graze around December 1. If we are planting behind cotton, we'll plant the wheat around the first of November and expect to graze it about the first of January."

To get and keep the winter annuals productive, he applies 30 lb. of nitrogen after they are established and waits until they are 6-8 in. tall before turning the cattle on them. When the cows do go in, they usually don't stay in.

"We'll pull them off when they've had their fill. That's usually about 4 hours a day. Then, we'll take them off and feed them hay. Or, sometimes we'll graze them one day and keep them off two days. We also divide the fields into three pastures of about 80 acres each and rotate."

"Limit-grazing is a great practice," Andrae says, "particularly with mature cows. You are essentially using the high-quality forage as a protein and energy supplement."

When the cattle aren't grazing the winter annuals, Blitch feeds half peanut hay and half Bahia grass hay. When needed, he also supplements



Apache arrowleaf clover helps keep Blitch's cattle in good condition.

with amounts equaling 2 lb. per head per day of whole cottonseed fed on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Blitch has his cows on a January calving season, so by breeding season, and by the time the calves are old enough to gain from the grazing, he usually has an abundant supply of wheat, rye and clover.

### Bahia grass benefits

In mid-April, when the winter annuals are starting to fade, the Bahia grass is up and running. “We use all Tifton 9 Bahia grass,” Blitch comments. “It is sometimes hard to establish, but I like it. It is easy to manage, and my cattle stay in real good shape.”

He adds, “It comes out earlier in the spring and stays later in the fall. It recovers quicker and doesn’t get tough.”

University of Florida forage specialist Ann Blount is also a fan of Bahia grass in general, and of Tifton 9 in particular.

“Bahia grass is native to South America. It comes from an area with a similar climate and soils as the Southern Coastal Plain region of the United States,” she says.

Blount says Tifton 9, developed by the legendary Glenn Burton at Georgia’s Coastal Plain Experiment Station, is an improved Pensacola variety. “It produces significantly more tonnage, 20% to 25%

annually, than either Argentine or Pensacola,” she notes. “It is similar to Pensacola in its growing season and is very easy to maintain with a low level of inputs.”

She adds, “It is pretty tolerant of acidic soils and has very good disease and insect resistance. Rarely does it require any pesticides. Only occasionally may it have to be treated for fall army worms.”

Even though it is a low-input forage, Blitch still manages his Bahia grass to the max. He has nine pastures of approximately 40 acres each. After he pulls his bulls out of the cow herds, he combines all 260 cows into one herd and rotates them every four to seven days.

“Rotation probably improves forage utilization because cows are forced to eat grass they would normally refuse,” Andrae comments. “It probably helps him carry more cows because less forage is wasted.”

“The rotational system and intensive grazing of the clovers really helps with spring weed control,” Blitch adds, “especially with wild barley, pepperweed, chickweed and dock.”

After his cows have grazed the Bahia grass and clover pastures all summer, he starts the cycle again in the fall. “We’re trying to have year-round grazing,” Blitch says. “We’re close.”



Replacement heifers breed and calve by the time they are 2 years old with the help of high-quality forages.

### Angus bulls fit the system, too

Jimmy Blitch is just as particular about his bull breeds as he is his forage varieties. Angus fits his specs.

To create replacement heifers for his operation, he breeds Angus bulls to Hereford cows. “They have good hybrid vigor. There is a lot of meat in those cattle. The calves sell good, too,” he notes.

He also breeds the Angus-Hereford-cross heifers back to low-birth-weight Angus bulls. By synchronizing with CIDR®s, then breeding the heifers by artificial insemination (AI), Blitch says they are getting 65% AI conception rates.

“The heifers are in good shape coming off the clover,” he notes. “That’s one reason we like our Angus. They are dropping a calf before they are 2 years old.”

He adds, “We haven’t had to pull a calf in two years.”

Once the calves leave his farm, they continue to work. He generally sells half interest in the calves to a Texas feedlot. “We are getting 76% Choice and 95% Yield Grade (YG) 3 or better,” Blitch says. “Our cattle seem to be getting better every year, mainly because of our culling and selection of better heifers and bulls.”