

Switchgrass as Forage or Biomass

Switchgrass is a native warm-season grass that someday may be used to produce biomass energy. While you wait for that to happen, switchgrass also makes good pasture and hay.

Switchgrass pasture needs very careful management. It must be grazed before seedstalks develop. Switchgrass quality is high and palatability good when young. Yearlings often gain 1.5 to 2 lbs per day during this time. After seedheads emerge, though, nutrient levels decline rapidly and animals refuse to eat much of it.

Grazing usually must begin in June, when switchgrass gets about a foot tall. It works best to stock it heavily so plants are grazed down to about 6 inches of stubble within three weeks. Then allow it to regrow around six weeks and graze regrowth about mid-August but be sure to leave at least six inches of stubble going into winter.

If cut for hay, switchgrass is very palatable and nutritious before or just as seedheads appear. It makes excellent hay for weaning calves or growing young stock. But as with grazing, as plants become mature and stemmy, switchgrass hay becomes less desirable and may need to be ground in order to be used effectively. Nonetheless, it should be cut for hay instead of being left for poor quality grazing whenever cattle are unable to graze it before seed heads appear.

Do not cut regrowth a second time for hay. This will weaken stands. If regrowth is plentiful following an early hay harvest, graze regrowth lightly but leave six or more inches of stubble for winter.

Switchgrass will not be used for much energy production for a few years but makes an excellent forage now when managed correctly.

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