

## Perennial Grass Establishment

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High cattle prices and loss of grass forage due to drought will encourage many ranchers to improve forage production in their pastures this next year. The Fannin Soil & Water Conservation District produced a forage brochure called Outstanding Forages of Fannin County that may be picked up at the Conservation District or NRCS office in Bonham. It may also be seen on their web site at [FanninSWCD.com](http://FanninSWCD.com). There are several proven steps to a successful stand of grass. Leave out one of the steps and your chances of success are greatly reduced.

**Step 1: Seedbed Preparation** – There are many ways to establish a stand of grass but the best way is to disturb the soil 4-6 inches deep with chisels, disk, field cultivator, and harrow. The key is to completely kill all existing vegetation and end up with a smooth, firm seedbed. This takes time, especially in the blackland. We recommend you start seedbed preparation in the fall on blackland in order for the clods to dissolve and create a smooth seedbed. It is essential to remove all competing vegetation such as Johnsongrass and ryegrass. These can be controlled with an application of glyphosate (roundup) in the fall for Johnsongrass and January - February for ryegrass. On sandy soils, seedbed preparation may begin in the spring unless you are planting (natives) in December or January or sprigging in February or March. Immediately before planting pull a harrow to smooth the seedbed and dry out the top soil surface so soil will not stick to grass planters and cultipackers.

**Step 2: Seeding Operation** – Seed may be purchased at the Fannin Soil & Water Conservation District, 200 E. 1<sup>st</sup> Street, RM 6 Bonham, TX or call 903-583-5612 (Mary Jane Godwin, Secretary) or other seed dealers. There are many ways to plant seeded grasses, but the best way is to broadcast the seed over a packed seedbed then follow with a packer behind the seeder. This requires two packing operations unless you are using a Brillion Seed Planter which is equipped with a front and back packer. The Fannin SWCD (903-583-5612) has two brillion planters for rent to farmers and ranchers to assist with their seeding operation. Without packing the soil you have little chance of survival of the seeded grasses. Do not harrow, disk, or pull any tillage equipment over the seeded area after planting. This will cover the seed with too much soil. This is why it is important to have a smooth seedbed. If clods are present (even small ones) the seed will filter through the cracks around the clods. If seed are over ¼ inch in depth they will not come up. Timing of the seeding operation is also important. Native grasses and forbs should be seeded in the months of December, January, February, March, or early April. Bermudagrass should be planted from April 10 through May 5. Old World Bluestems should be planted between March and late April. Fescue and Tall Jose Wheatgrass should be planted in late September through early November. Sprigging of coastal or Tifton 85 should be done between Jan. 1 and Mid April.

**Step 3: Nutrient Management** – Soil test can save you a lot of money and also insure you a good stand of grass. I get a copy of most soil test in the area and believe me there is a huge variation of fertilizer elements present in Fannin County Soils. There is only one soil test lab that can be used; Texas A & M (Melich III, ICP). Initial establishment fertilizer should be plowed in just prior to planting. Additional nitrogen should be applied after plants have germinated and are in the 3 to 5 leaf stage. All fertilizer should be applied when the plants can utilize the nutrients. In other words do not apply nutrients in the fall for spring use. Lime should be applied and incorporated prior to planting. It takes several months for the lime to change the soil pH.

**Step 4: Pest Management** – Weeds are the single most limiting factor in grass establishment. They can cause a total stand failure or cause several years in delay for getting the desired forage stand. Johnsongrass should be controlled chemically by treating it in the *year previous* to planting. This may require 1 to 2 applications of glyphosate followed by frequent plowings. After grasses have been planted it is recommended to control weeds in the first year with mowing only. Chemicals can hurt young plants in the first year of establishment. The exception is when; a good stand of grass has reached the 5 leaf stage and annual weeds are abundant or if you are applying Diuron 4L as a pre-emerge immediately following a bermudagrass sprigging operation. Never let weeds shade or crowd your planted forage. Either mow or apply herbicide. For Johnsongrass control you may want to use a “rope wick” to apply glyphosate to the plant leaves. The year following establishment I suggest herbicide applications in May or early June to control weeds and brush species.

For more information on establishing perennial grasses contact the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service office at 200 E. First Street RM 14 Bonham, TX 75418 or call 903-583-9513 x3.