

Johnsongrass: The Good, Bad And The Ugly

GALENA, MO.

Johnsongrass is common along roads in the Ozarks but there is a lot about the species that people don't know.

Johnsongrass has been in America since a South Carolina farmer named William Johnson promoted it in the south during the 1840s. Since then it has moved north and west and is commonly seen in pastures, hayfields and along roads.

Turns out, Johnsongrass has good, bad and ugly traits according to Tim Schnakenberg, agronomy specialist, University of Missouri Extension.

THE GOOD

From a livestock standpoint, Johnsongrass is a palatable forage. It is high quality, a good producer, persistent and is drought tolerant.

"One study I read found that among 14 species tested, Johnsongrass ranked second only to Switchgrass in grazing preference," said Schnakenberg.

THE BAD

One of the downsides is that Johnsongrass is invasive. It reproduces from seed and underground stems called rhizomes. A single plant has been documented to have as much as 275 feet of rhizomes and as many as 80,000 seeds.

"Johnsongrass competes with other species and can overtake fields and highway right of ways," said Schnakenberg.

THE UGLY

There is one ugly problem that comes with Johnsongrass.

There have been several cows killed this year during the drought as a result of prussic acid poisoning or nitrate toxicity in Johnsongrass and similar forages like sorghum sudan.

"It doesn't happen on every farm but once in a while we've seen and heard of cattle dying when conditions are just right," said Schnakenberg.

Prussic acid or cyanide can build up in the plant when it's less than two feet tall, and can also occur after a frost in the fall. Harvesting it for hay will dissipate the prussic acid. Nitrates build up when farmers fertilize it as a crop and the drought prevents the plant from using the nitrogen. Harvesting it for hay keeps the same level of toxic nitrates as the day it was harvested.

"Tests for prussic acid are hard to come by but the plant can be tested for nitrates. The recent rains have help alleviate the problem but if farmers are still concerned, we encourage testing," said Schnakenberg. △



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