

Perennially PROFITABLE PEANUTS

These forage peanuts make
top-dollar hay.

Years ago as a row cropper, Chuck Paarlberg of Lee, Fla., was going broke. He found a way to stay in farming when he switched from row crops to growing a hay crop—perennial peanuts. He started with 65 acres, which he gradually increased to 300.

Due to the success of growers such as Paarlberg, perennial peanuts have emerged as an alternative, high-quality forage crop in warmer regions of the Deep South.

Paarlberg grows the forage peanuts on sandy, well-drained soil that wouldn't grow soybeans due to nematodes. Typical hay yields are about 3 tons per acre. Paarlberg uses a hay conditioner and stores his hay in an enclosed barn to help maintain the green color desired by his customers.

Crude protein ranges from 13 to 18%, according to this Florida farmer, and digestibility is similar to alfalfa. That's one reason why University of Florida forage breeder Ann Blount calls perennial peanuts the alfalfa of the South. She adds

that these forage peanuts are well adapted to the lower Coastal Plain, which is why she also refers to perennial peanuts as the bahiagrass of legumes.

Though this crop offers many benefits, it does have weaknesses, including, slow establishment and weed competition during establishment. Also, the plants do not tolerate cold. "Don't plant them farther than 80 miles from the coast," advises Paarlberg.

New stands are propagated like hybrid bermudagrass by transplanting underground rhizomes or sprigs. Paarlberg notes that establishment costs vary from \$200 to \$500 per acre, and the typical cost to buy sprigs is \$2 per bushel.

Clay Olson, Taylor County, Fla., Extension agent, says new growers may be disappointed in first-year stands because the plant puts its resources into growing



Perennial peanuts are harvested at the Sunbelt Expo farm near Moultrie, Ga. PHOTOS: JOHN LEIDNER

roots. "If you have 40% coverage the first year, it doubles the second year and closes in the third year," says Olson.

Paarlberg adds, "We say it sleeps the first year, creeps the second year and leaps the third year."

To speed up coverage, Olson suggests planting 80 bushels of sprigs per acre and using irrigation. Paarlberg has used center-pivot irrigation to establish his stands and keep them productive.

Though the conventional belief is that it does not pay to irrigate forages, University of Florida ag economist Tim Hewitt says this crop may be an exception. There is strong demand for the hay. At a conservative price of \$150 per ton, profits exceed \$100 per acre with a 3-ton yield. That makes perennial peanuts more profitable than many field crops grown today, says Hewitt.

Jim Parks of Bradenton, Fla., runs two retail farm-supply stores and says he can't get enough perennial peanut hay to sell to his customers. Parks sells it for \$8.75 per bale, and he believes the hay is undervalued because he sells western alfalfa for \$13.75 per bale.

Unloading hay trailers is a labor expense he'd like to eliminate. Parks would like to see producers palletize their bales and use drop trailers that could be left at his retail stores until they are empty.

When it comes to marketing perennial peanut hay, "supply is the only problem I have," Parks explains.

By JOHN LEIDNER

The Many Uses of Perennial Peanuts

Hay is the main use of perennial peanuts, but the crop can be used as a protein supplement for most livestock. Research shows that high-quality perennial peanut hay can be used to finish beef cattle. In addition,

A high-protein legume, perennial peanuts compare well with alfalfa in forage quality.



it works well for creep grazing.

Good-quality peanut hay is generally too good for brood cows. However, low-quality, rained-on hay can be used to feed them. With properties similar to alfalfa, perennial peanuts are considered an excellent forage source for dairy cows.

Another use for this crop is as an ornamental in lawns. Ecoturf, an ornamental variety developed by the University of Florida, produces abundant, bright-yellow flowers and is aggressive in establishment.

Perennial peanuts also can be used in wildlife food plots to attract deer and provide them with protein during summer months.