

# 2009 Cool-Season Grass Horse Grazing Tolerance Report

*G.L. Olson, S.R. Smith, G.D. Lacefield and T.D. Phillips, UK Department of Plant and Soil Sciences; L.M. Lawrence, UK Department of Animal and Food Sciences*

## Introduction

Cool-season grasses such as bluegrass, tall fescue, and orchardgrass are dominant pasture grasses for horses in Kentucky. Variety evaluations for yield have been carried out for many years, but little work has been done to establish the effect of variety on persistence when subjected to close, continuous grazing by horses.

The purpose of this report is to summarize current research on the grazing tolerance of varieties of tall fescue, orchardgrass, and other species when subjected to continuous heavy grazing pressure by horses within the grazing season. The main focus will be on stand survival.

The UK Forage Extension website at [www.uky.edu/Ag/Forage](http://www.uky.edu/Ag/Forage) contains electronic versions of all forage variety testing reports from Kentucky and surrounding states and from a large number of other forage publications.

## Description of the Tests

Tests were established in Lexington in the fall of 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. The soils at this location are well-drained silt loams and are well suited to tall fescue, orchardgrass, and other cool-season grasses. Plots were 5 by 15 feet in a randomized complete block design, with each variety replicated six times. Plots were seeded at the recommended seeding rate per acre and were planted into a prepared seedbed using a disk drill. Grazing was continuous from April to October.

Plots were grazed down to below 4 inches quickly and were maintained at 1 to 3 inches for the remainder of the grazing season. Supplemental hay was fed during periods of slowest growth. Visual ratings of percent stand were made in the fall several weeks after the horses were removed to check stand survival after the grazing season and

in the spring prior to grazing to check on winter survival and spring growth. Since trials were seeded in rows, persistence ratings were based on density within a row and not total ground cover. Grass plots were fertilized with 60 lb/A of actual N in the spring and 30 to 40 lb/A of actual N in early November after horses were removed from the pasture. Other fertilizers (lime, P, and K) were applied as needed.

## Results and Discussion

Weather data for Lexington for 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 are presented in Table 1.

Data on percent stand are presented in Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6. Table 2 presents grazing preference data.

Statistical analyses were performed on all entries (including experimentals) to determine if numerical differences are truly due to variety. Varieties not significantly different from the highest numerical value in a column are marked with one asterisk (\*). To determine if two varieties are truly different, compare the difference between the two varieties to the Least Significant Difference (LSD) at the bottom of the column. If the difference is equal to or greater than the LSD, the varieties are truly different when grown under the conditions at a given location. The Coefficient of Variation (CV), which is a measure of the variability of the data, is included for each column of means. Low variability is desirable, and increased variability within a study results in higher CVs and larger LSDs.

In general, commercial varieties of tall fescue and orchardgrass tolerated overgrazing well (Tables 3, 4 and 5), but the varieties of timothy in these trials did not. The sensitivity of timothy to heavy grazing was not surprising, as it is an erect species and sensitive to heavy defoliation. Perennial ryegrasses, Kentucky bluegrasses and festuloliums vary in tolerance to grazing.

The lack of a defined “grazing-tolerant variety” for these species makes absolute interpretation difficult. For example, endophyte-infected “Kentucky 31” (KY31+) is known to be grazing tolerant. However, there are no proven grazing-tolerant varieties for the other species. Still, certain varieties were clearly more tolerant than others.

Differences in tolerance among varieties could be due to true grazing tolerance but also to preference, especially where highly palatable species such as bluegrass and ryegrass were in the same test as tall fescue. Because of potential preference between species, comparison between varieties is most accurate within a species. These data should be taken as an indication of tolerance to periods of overgrazing. For best pasture stands, forage grasses should not be abused as in this study.

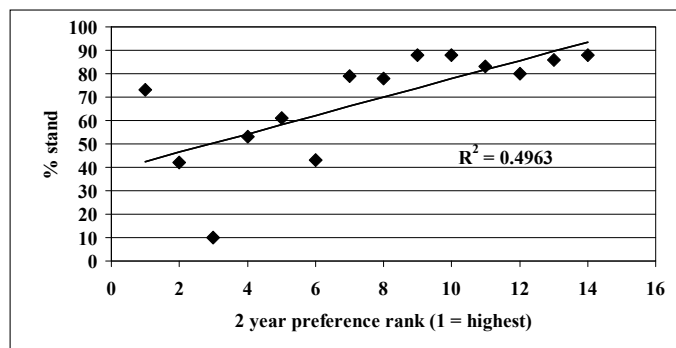
## Ranking Varieties by Preference

Differences in tolerance among varieties could be due to true grazing tolerance but also to preference, as horses may graze the preferred varieties more intensely than the less preferred varieties. In spring 2004 and spring 2005, the varieties sown in fall 2003 were used to assess the grazing preferences of horses. During the first week of grazing in both years, variety plots were measured for forage height and scored for forage density and evidence of grazing. Measurements were made before horses were given access to plots and on days 2, 5, and 7. Forage density was scored from 0 to 10, where 10 indicated that 100 percent of the plot was covered with the seeded variety and 0 indicated that there were no plants of the seeded variety. Similarly, grazing intensity was scored from 0 to 10; where 10 indicated that 100 percent of the plants had been grazed and 0 indicated that none of the plants had been grazed.

Preference rankings were generated using a combination of measurements including the percent reduction in forage height between day 0 and day 7 (greatest reduction = most preferred); the unit decrease in forage density from day 0 to day 7 (largest unit reduction = most preferred); and the grazing intensity scores from day 7 (highest grazing score = most preferred). The rankings for each characteristic were then totaled and the varieties with the lowest totals were considered most preferred. Table 2 shows the preference rankings determined in spring 2004 and spring 2005 for the forage varieties sown in fall 2003. A two-year ranking was also determined based on the total from the 2004 and 2005 rankings. When two forages had the same two-year total, the tie was broken using the 2004 score. In general, tall fescue varieties were less preferred by horses than timothy and orchardgrass. However, only one variety of orchardgrass was included in this test. Common bluegrass also appeared to have low palatability to horses, although the "Ginger" variety of bluegrass was well accepted. This may have been influenced by maturity.

To determine whether grazing preferences might affect the grazing tolerance of cool-season grass varieties, the relationship of the two-year grazing preference ranking to the percent stand remaining in fall 2006 was plotted in Figure 1. There is a moderate relationship between preference rank and percent stand ( $R^2 = 0.49$ ); least preferred varieties had the highest percent stand after three grazing seasons. Two varieties appear to have performed differently than the others: "Haymate" orchardgrass had a relatively high stand percentage (73 percent),

**Figure 1. Relationship of preference ranking to percent stand remaining, Fall, 2006.**



Note-species on above figure are as follows:  
 1-orchardgrass, 2-timothy, 3-smooth brome, 4-festulolium,  
 5-KY bluegrass, 6-timothy, 7-13-tall fescue, 14-KY bluegrass

even though it was highly preferred; the "Peak" variety of smooth brome grass had an extremely low stand percentage (10 percent) compared to all other varieties.

Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 include preference ratings made two to three weeks after horses started grazing. These ratings do not provide information on initial preference, but do provide a good indication of the varieties that the horses repeatedly grazed during the first few weeks on pasture.

### Summary Table

Table 7 summarizes information about distributors and persistence across years for all varieties in these tests. Varieties are listed in alphabetical order, with experimental varieties listed at the bottom. An open block indicates that the variety was not in that particular test (labeled at the top of the column); an "x" in the block indicates the variety was in the test but was significantly different from the most

persistent variety. A single asterisk (\*) means that the variety was not significantly different from the most persistent variety in that study based on the 0.05 LSD. It is best to choose a variety that has performed well over several years.

### Summary

These studies indicate that there are varieties of cool-season grasses that can tolerate overgrazing by horses for three to four seasons and still maintain reasonable stands. This information should be used along with yield and other information (for example, relative maturity in spring) in selecting the best grass variety for each individual use. It is not generally recommended that tall fescue, orchardgrass, or other cool-season grasses be continuously overgrazed as was done in this trial. Although several varieties expressed tolerance to the level of grazing pressure used in these trials, overgrazing

**Table 1. Temperature and rainfall at Lexington, Kentucky in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009.**

	2006				2007				2008				2009 <sup>2</sup>			
	Temperature		Rainfall		Temperature		Rainfall		Temperature		Rainfall		Temperature		Rainfall	
	°F	DEP <sup>1</sup>	IN	DEP	°F	DEP	IN	DEP	°F	DEP	IN	DEP	°F	DEP	IN	DEP
JAN	42	+11	4.77	+1.91	37	+6	2.93	+0.07	33	+2	4.60	+1.74	28	-3	2.45	-0.41
FEB	36	+1	2.13	-1.08	27	-8	1.83	-1.38	36	+1	5.37	+2.16	38	+3	2.86	-0.35
MAR	44	0	3.05	-1.35	52	+8	1.97	-2.43	45	+1	6.28	+1.88	48	+4	2.19	-2.21
APR	59	+4	3.52	-0.36	53	-2	3.87	-0.01	55	0	5.72	+1.84	55	0	4.48	+0.60
MAY	62	-2	2.99	-1.48	68	+4	1.45	-3.02	62	-2	4.88	+0.41	64	0	5.05	+0.58
JUN	70	-2	1.82	-1.84	74	+2	1.77	-1.89	74	+2	3.30	-0.36	74	+2	5.41	+1.75
JUL	76	0	5.13	+0.13	74	-2	6.90	+1.90	76	0	2.54	-2.46	71	-5	5.89	+0.89
AUG	76	+1	3.23	-0.70	80	+5	2.56	-1.37	75	0	1.08	-2.85	73	-2	5.38	+1.45
SEP	64	-4	9.27	+6.07	72	+4	1.15	-2.05	72	+4	1.21	-1.99	68	0	5.37	+2.17
OCT	54	-3	4.88	+2.31	63	+6	5.28	+2.71	57	0	1.35	-1.22	54	-3	4.83	+2.26
NOV	47	+2	1.78	-1.61	46	+1	2.86	-0.53	43	-2	2.28	-1.11	49	+4	0.94	-2.45
DEC	42	+6	2.45	-1.53	40	+4	5.29	+1.31	35	-1	4.76	+0.78				
Total			45.02	+0.47			37.86	-6.69			43.37	-1.18			44.85	+4.28

<sup>1</sup> DEP is departure from the long-term average.

<sup>2</sup> 2009 data is for eleven months through November.

greatly reduces forage production. This information should be an indication of those varieties that will better withstand overgrazing when it occurs.

Good management for maximum life from any grass would be to allow complete establishment before grazing and to avoid overgrazing during times of extreme stress, such as drought.

## Authors

- G.L. Olson, Research Specialist, Forages
- S.R. Smith, Extension Associate Professor, Forages
- L.M. Lawrence, Professor, Horse Nutrition
- G.D. Lacefield, Extension Professor, Forages
- T.D. Phillips, Associate Professor, Tall Fescue Breeding

**Table 2. Preference rankings determined in the first week of grazing in Spring 2004 and Spring 2005 for cool season grass varieties sown September 17, 2003 at Lexington, Kentucky.**

Variety	Species	Preference Rank <sup>1</sup>		2-yr Rank <sup>2</sup>	Percent Stand
		Spring 2004	Spring 2005		Oct. 25, 2007 <sup>3</sup>
Haymate	orchardgrass	2	1	1	58
Barfleo	timothy	1	6	2	17
Peak	smooth brome	3	4	3	7
KYFA 9819	festulolium	5	3	4	16
Ginger	KY bluegrass	4	5	5	54
TM 9901	timothy	8	2	6	17
KYFA 0006	tall fescue	7	7	7	74
KYFA 9602	tall fescue	6	11	8	37
KYFA 9611	tall fescue	9	8	9	61
KYFA 9304	tall fescue	10	10	10	66
Select	tall fescue	12	12	11	65
KYTF 2	tall fescue	15	9	12	63
KY 31-	tall fescue	11	14	13	69
Common	KY bluegrass	13	13	14	58
AR 1	tall fescue	14	15	15	73

<sup>1</sup> 1=most preferred, 15=least preferred; see text for explanation of ranking process.  
<sup>2</sup> 1=most preferred based on 2-year total; when two varieties had the same 2-year total, ties were broken using the 2004 rank.  
<sup>3</sup> Stand survival after 4 years of continuous grazing.

**Table 3. Seedling vigor, grazing preference and stand persistence of forage grasses sown September 9, 2005 in a horse grazing tolerance study at Lexington, Kentucky.**

Variety	Species	Seedling Vigor <sup>1</sup>	Grazing Preference <sup>2</sup>	Percent Stand							
		2005	2008	2006		2007		2008		2009	
		Nov 10	May 20	Apr 4	Nov 3	Mar 30	Oct 25	Apr 7	Nov 20	Apr 9	Nov 19
<b>Commercial Varieties—Available for Farm Use</b>											
KY31+ <sup>3</sup>	tall fescue	3.8	2.2	98	87	87	83	84	84	92	93*
Jesup MaxQ	tall fescue	2.5	1.0	96	77	65	81	82	78	82	71
Select	tall fescue	3.0	2.2	94	94	92	84	86	63	64	66
Benchmark Plus	orchardgrass	4.0	3.6	85	87	77	75	75	74	78	58
Persist	orchardgrass	3.2	3.8	89	76	72	68	82	50	38	42
Talon	timothy	2.0	8.0	65	33	31	14	23	11	11	13
Tekapo	orchardgrass	2.8	8.0	68	58	28	32	38	27	13	11
Summit	timothy	1.7	8.0	62	40	32	13	34	8	4	5
Derby	timothy	2.7	8.2	78	28	28	13	26	9	7	4
Spring Green	festulolium	4.3	8.2	95	69	69	70	71	47	0	0
Duo	festulolium	5.0	8.7	100	74	71	58	43	18	0	0
<b>Experimental Varieties</b>											
KYFA 9821/AR542	tall fescue	3.5	1.7	98	92	91	92	92	90	93	93*
KY31- <sup>3</sup>	tall fescue	3.5	2.0	98	93	91	95	92	88	87	91*
KYFA 9821/AR584	tall fescue	3.3	1.7	96	93	91	93	91	90	94	89*
KYFA 9821	tall fescue	3.5	1.3	98	96	94	90	89	87	92	88*
OG0203G	orchardgrass	3.5	6.8	91	81	66	71	81	61	37	28
SW ER3575	perennial ryegrass	4.8	8.7	100	97	98	89	86	56	3	6
SW ER3579	perennial ryegrass	4.5	9.0	97	91	93	83	73	40	0	3
SW ER3508FR1	perennial ryegrass	4.0	9.0	96	83	82	76	75	43	3	1
Mean		3.5	5.4	89.7	76.1	71.4	67.2	68.5	53.7	41.6	39.9
CV,%		20.4	21.4	17.3	24.8	27.4	26.1	25.9	33.0	28.1	37.1
LSD,0.05		0.8	1.3	17.9	21.7	22.6	20.2	20.7	20.5	13.5	17.0

<sup>1</sup> Vigor score based on a rating of 1 to 5 with 5 being the most vigorous seedling growth.

<sup>2</sup> Preference score based on a scale of 1 to 9 with 9 indicating all forage was grazed. Grazing time before rating-15 days. Stand thinning may have been greater for preferred varieties due to closer grazing.

<sup>3</sup> KY 31 E- is the variety KY 31 where the toxic endophyte has been removed. MaxQ, AR584 and AR542 are non-toxic endophytes. KY31+ contains the toxic endophyte. The other fescue varieties in this test do not contain an endophyte.

\* Not significantly different from the highest value in the column, based on the 0.05 LSD.

**Table 4. Seedling vigor, grazing preference and stand persistence of forage grasses sown September 6, 2006 in a horse grazing tolerance study at Lexington, Kentucky.**

Variety	Species	Seedling Vigor <sup>1</sup>	Grazing Preference <sup>2</sup>		Percent Stand						
		2006	2008	2009	2006	2007		2008		2009	
		Oct 25	May 20	Jun 11	Oct 25	Mar 30	Oct 24	Apr 7	Nov 20	Apr 9	Nov 19
<b>Commercial Varieties—Available for Farm Use</b>											
KY31+ <sup>3</sup>	tall fescue	3.0	1.2	3.0	100	100	99	100	100	100	100*
Select	tall fescue	3.0	1.2	2.7	100	100	99	100	98	98	98*
Benchmark Plus	orchardgrass	2.5	2.3	3.7	99	99	99	99	98	98	92*
Ambrosia	orchardgrass	2.2	7.0	5.5	98	87	86	91	85	68	60
Ginger	KY bluegrass	1.0	5.0	5.7	84	99	91	91	56	61	40
Sulino	festulolium	4.3	8.8	7.0	100	100	88	89	63	6	10
Felopa	festulolium	4.5	8.3	9.0	100	100	81	89	54	3	6
Duo	festulolium	5.0	7.8	–	98	98	31	35	29	5	6
Agula	festulolium	4.3	8.3	–	100	100	80	88	39	0	3
<b>Experimental Varieties</b>											
KYFA 9301/AR584	tall fescue	3.0	1.0	3.2	100	100	100	100	100	100	100*
KYFA 9821/AR542	tall fescue	2.8	1.0	3.0	99	100	99	99	99	100	99*
KYFA 9821/AR584	tall fescue	3.0	1.0	3.2	99	99	99	100	100	100	99*
KYFA 9821EF	tall fescue	3.0	1.2	3.3	100	100	100	100	100	100	99*
KY31- <sup>3</sup>	tall fescue	3.0	1.3	4.0	100	100	99	100	98	95	93*
KYFA 9304	tall fescue	3.0	1.3	3.0	100	100	100	100	98	97	93*
B-50815	KY bluegrass	1.0	8.7	2.7	100	100	99	100	96	98	86
OG0203G	orchardgrass	2.2	5.0	2.8	99	94	91	91	92	91	77
B-50336	KY bluegrass	1.0	8.5	4.2	99	97	95	96	82	91	75
HTBF 2000	KY bluegrass	1.0	8.8	7.7	98	99	97	98	86	92	68
HTBF 1000	KY bluegrass	1.0	9.0	8.0	99	99	94	97	86	85	58
NF 06101	orchardgrass	2.0	–	–	100	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean		2.7	4.8	4.2	98.7	93.9	86.9	88.7	79.0	70.8	64.7
CV,%		10.5	15.2	34.5	8.1	4.5	6.7	6.0	16.5	12.9	17.6
LSD,0.05		0.3	0.8	2.2	9.1	4.9	6.6	6.1	14.9	10.4	13.0

<sup>1</sup> Vigor score based on a rating of 1 to 5 with 5 being the most vigorous seedling growth.

<sup>2</sup> Preference score based on a scale of 1 to 9 with 9 indicating all forage was grazed. Grazing time before rating: 2008-15 days, 2009-25 days. Stand thinning may have been greater for preferred varieties due to closer grazing.

<sup>3</sup> KY 31 E- is the variety KY 31 where the toxic endophyte has been removed. AR584 and AR542 are non-toxic endophytes. KY31+ contains the toxic endophyte. The other fescue varieties in this test do not contain an endophyte.

\* Not significantly different from the highest value in the column, based on the 0.05 LSD.

**Table 5. Seedling vigor, grazing preference and stand persistence of forage grasses sown September 6, 2007 in a horse grazing tolerance study at Lexington, Kentucky.**

Variety	Species	Seedling Vigor <sup>1</sup>	Grazing Preference <sup>2</sup>	Percent Stand				
		2007	2009	2007	2008		2009	
		Nov 16	Jun 11	Nov 16	Apr 7	Oct 20	Apr 9	Nov 19
<b>Commercial Varieties—Available for Farm Use</b>								
KY31+ <sup>3</sup>	tall fescue	4.2	1.8	92	93	94	98	97*
Throughblue	KY bluegrass	1.3	4.8	66	73	80	93	92*
BarOptima PLUS E34	tall fescue	4.0	1.0	87	86	84	89	89*
Select	tall fescue	3.0	3.2	77	74	60	83	82*
Benchmark Plus	orchardgrass	3.3	5.2	89	84	83	88	81*
Nanryo	tall fescue	2.4	3.8	65	72	56	61	60
Barderby	KY bluegrass	1.0	6.8	79	74	63	77	59
Granddaddy	perennial ryegrass	4.3	6.2	78	83	71	35	37
Lato	KY bluegrass	1.8	5.4	70	71	43	38	37
<b>Experimental Varieties</b>								
KYFA 9301/AR584	tall fescue	4.3	2.2	91	86	85	94	95*
KYFA 9821/AR584	tall fescue	3.7	3.8	92	91	85	89	90*
KY31- <sup>3</sup>	tall fescue	4.2	2.0	87	87	82	85	85*
Mean		3.3	3.8	81.9	81.4	73.9	77.5	75.2
CV,%		21.5	52.4	16.5	19.5	21.6	19.0	20.8
LSD,0.05		0.9	2.3	16.4	18.7	18.8	17.0	18.1

<sup>1</sup> Vigor score based on a rating of 1 to 5 with 5 being the most vigorous seedling growth.

<sup>2</sup> Preference score based on a scale of 1 to 9 with 9 indicating all forage was grazed. Grazing time before rating-15 days. Stand thinning may have been greater for preferred varieties due to closer grazing.

<sup>3</sup> KY 31 E- is the variety KY 31 where the toxic endophyte has been removed. AR584 is a non-toxic endophyte. KY31+ contains the toxic endophyte. BarOptima PLUS E34 contains a beneficial endophyte. The other fescue varieties in this test do not contain an endophyte.

\* Not significantly different from the highest value in the column, based on the 0.05 LSD.

**Table 6. Seedling vigor, grazing preference and stand persistence of forage grasses sown September 11, 2008 in a horse grazing tolerance study at Lexington, Kentucky.**

Variety	Species	Seedling Vigor <sup>1</sup>	Grazing Preferences <sup>2</sup>	Percent Stand		
		2008	2009	2008	2009	
		Oct 14	Jun 5	Oct 14	Apr 9	Nov 19
<b>Commercial Varieties—Available for Farm Use</b>						
Select	Tall fescue	3.2	2.7	95	98	100*
Cowgirl	Tall fescue	3.5	3.5	96	98	99*
Granddaddy	perennial ryegrass	4.8	3.0	97	100	97*
KY31+ <sup>3</sup>	Tall fescue	2.7	5.5	93	93	95*
Benchmark Plus	orchardgrass	3.3	2.5	93	98	93*
Climax	timothy	2.3	4.5	94	98	93*
Jesup MaxQ	Tall fescue	2.8	4.5	90	93	91*
Giant	bentgrass	2.3	5.7	89	88	83
Ginger	KY bluegrass	1.0	6.8	27	79	74
<b>Experimental Varieties</b>						
KY31- <sup>3</sup>	Tall fescue	2.3	4.3	93	98	98*
TF 0201	Tall fescue	3.2	4.7	93	94	93*
B-8.0082	bentgrass	1.5	7.7	88	85	93*
TM 0501G	timothy	1.3	5.0	78	85	91*
TM 0502G	timothy	1.2	5.5	52	79	80
Mean		2.6	4.7	84.0	91.8	91.4
CV,%		26.0	31.6	17.3	11.8	8.9
LSD,0.05		0.8	1.7	16.8	12.5	9.4
<sup>1</sup> Vigor score based on a rating of 1 to 5 with 5 being the most vigorous seedling growth. <sup>2</sup> Preference score based on a scale of 1 to 9 with 9 indicating all forage was grazed. Grazing time before rating-18 days. <sup>3</sup> KY 31 E- is the variety KY 31 where the toxic endophyte has been removed. MaxQ is a non-toxic endophyte. KY31+ contains the toxic endophyte. The other fescue varieties in this test do not contain an endophyte. * Not significantly different from the highest value in the column, based on the 0.05 LSD.						

