

# Florida Forage Handbook: Preface<sup>1</sup>

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With favorable climatic conditions and capacity for growing forages year-round, Florida is one of the main states in cow-calf production in the United States, ranking 10<sup>th</sup> nationwide in beef cow numbers (900,000). From the sandy southern tip of the peninsula to the more subtropical panhandle, Florida hosts over 1.7 million head of beef cattle, over 125,000 dairy cows, and approximately 500,000 horses in over 3.2 million acres of pastureland and 1.3 million acres of grazed woodland. Besides being home to five out of the 10 largest cow-calf outfits in the country, there are almost 18,500 beef cattle ranchers, producing over 800,000 calves being shipped out west every year. This represents over \$1.7 billion annually in revenue from livestock products for the state (USDA NASS 2016), helping making Florida the 7<sup>th</sup> state in agricultural exports. The beauty of this: it is mostly produced on strong, forage-based production systems. Recently, forages (re)gained new horizons, with the increased use of cover crops and great potential for integrated livestock-cropping systems. Regained because those practices remount back to the primordium of agriculture. New horizons because the diversification of production systems, increased cost of production, and increased focus on environmental aspects has placed forages on the main stage for sustainable agriculture. Forages are important providers of ecosystem services, being habitat for wildlife, securing atmospheric carbon in biomass and soil organic matter, regulating nutrient fluxes, and conserving soil and water.

In Florida, it is possible to grow a myriad of forage species: from tropical C4 grasses to subtropical legumes, going through high productivity, bioenergy-type canes to brassicas for small ruminants. The very productive Forage Breeding program at the University of Florida has released over 47 cultivars in the past several years, not including biofuel and turfgrasses. Those releases range from more reliable bahiagrass and bermudagrass cultivars to nematode-resistant clovers and tetraploid ryegrasses, reducing costs and increasing productivity. Rust-resistant small grains helped producers by reducing the need for supplemental feed and creating a new niche for beef cattle producers: backgrounding stockers in integrated livestock-cropping systems. Hay is also an important crop in Florida, with around 300,000 acres being harvested annually. High quality rhizoma peanut hay has also gained space among horse owners and small ruminant producers as an alternative to imported alfalfa hay.

This publication is a compendium of the various EDIS publications put together by the Faculty of the University of Florida and associates, covering the most diverse topics of forage- and livestock-related management practices. The objective is to provide reliable information for livestock producers, forage managers, professional workers in the livestock/forage industry, and anyone seeking information about forage crops grown in Florida. Originally organized by C. G. Chambliss and M. B. Adjei, this handbook counted

1. This document is SS-AGR-98, one of a series of the Agronomy Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date May 2002. Revised April 2014 and January 2018. Reviewed March 2021. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication. This publication is a part of the *Florida Forage Handbook*, an electronic publication of the Agronomy Department. For more information you may contact M. O. Wallau (mwallau@ufl.edu).
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on the participation of many generations of scientists and Extension agents, becoming the go-to guide for any forage enthusiast. Besides serving farm managers and Extension agents, this handbook also helped with the formation of several of our students, giving them practical information on conducting experiments, helping teach classes, and writing theses. The information contained here encompasses not only the new, forefront of forage research, but also the legacy and experience of all the previous generations of researchers that cooperated on this material.

In 2018, this series of publications is undergoing several updates and expansion as more factsheets are being added. For a list of available publications in the *Florida Forage Handbook*, see SS-AGR-97 Table of Contents (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ag170>). Beyond that, factsheet SS-AGR-105, *Managing South Florida Range for Cattle* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ag173>), presents a summary of the principles and practices of native-range management. Information on integrated crop-livestock systems can be found in factsheet SS-AGR-126, *Sod/Livestock-Based Peanut/Cotton Production System: The Next Generation Conservation Cropping System* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ag258>). For more information about resources from the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension office or visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

## Reference

US Department of Agriculture - National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA NASS). 2016. "2016 State Agriculture Overview: Florida." [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick\\_Stats/Ag\\_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=FLORIDA](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=FLORIDA) (December 2017)