

# Good Soil, Good Grass, Good Cattle

*Georgia producer strives for all three.*

*Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor*

Whether he is developing bulls and replacement heifers or finishing open heifers for freezer beef, Dan Glenn does it on forage. While he does have to fill in occasional gaps with homegrown hay, baleage or stockpiled forage, for the most part it is done on the green, growing kind.

The centerpiece of Deep Grass Graziers, his 350-cow Fitzgerald, Ga., operation, is a grazing hub featuring 95 acres under a six-tower, center-pivot irrigation system. Divided into eight paddocks with a triangular gate system in the middle, Glenn can easily move animals from any one paddock to another. That makes his grazing management system, featuring frequent rotations, more practical.

He also has permanent water troughs, complete with surrounding heavy-use areas, on every other fenceline. They water two paddocks at once, which is another time and money saver.

## Rotational grazing

“We use rotational grazing as a tool to grow more grass, to improve our soil health and to manage the animal-parasite cycle,” says Glenn. “By moving cattle off a paddock, it allows it to rest and grow more



*Fitzgerald, Ga., seedstock and commercial producer Dan Glenn strives to improve his soil, grass and cattle.*

high-quality forage. We also use it to create more docile cattle.”

The docility factor is a big plus. When Glenn inherited his grandfather’s herd, they were flighty. Along with culling for disposition, the cattle are now accustomed to Glenn moving them often, and they literally eat out of his hand.

University of Georgia (UGA) Extension Forage Specialist Dennis Hancock gives rotational grazing a thumbs up.

“By rationing the forage in a management-intensive grazing (MiG) system, of which there are many variations, farmers can make more efficient use of their land than if they continually keep animals in one large pasture,” Hancock says. He adds that MiG systems can increase the yield of animal products per acre and, in most cases, net profit per farm.

Hancock says there is another advantage to MiG, one that is near and dear to Glenn’s heart: “Animal waste is more uniformly distributed, and soil quality and fertility are improved.”

When it comes to how often to move his cattle, or stocking density, there are no set answers, Glenn says. “It depends on the rainfall, the season and how busy we are.”

He notes he is more aggressive about frequent rotations in his irrigated hub, which he usually saves for developing bulls, grass-finishing animals or his embryo transfer (ET) cows. Generally, that translates to once-a-day moves to keep them on the most vegetative, nutritious forage possible.

With his brood cows, which typically stay on either Tifton 9 or Pensacola Bahia grass pastures, he’ll

sometimes go as long as two weeks between moves.

The same goes for high stocking density. With his brood cows, he might graze under more conventional stocking rates of one cow and calf per acre of forage, but when he is grazing rapidly growing forages under the pivot hub, he will go as high as 100,000 or 150,000 pounds (lb.) of cattle per acre.

In the paddocks in the hub, Glenn uses a variety of forages with different growing seasons, another key in providing year-round groceries for his cattle. Three of those are in Tifton 85 Bermuda grass, a highly productive and quality hybrid. Another is in Coastcross 2, which, says Glenn, is a newer hybrid and the only one that can compete with Tifton 85 in quality and productivity.

The other half of the paddocks are in annuals. That includes a brassica hybrid (T Raptor) and an oat mix for early-season winter grazing, then ryegrass, crimson clover and hairy vetch for late winter and early spring.

"I used to plant them all in one mix," says Glenn, "but I wasn't getting my money's worth. The cattle trampled the underdeveloped ryegrass and clover while eating the oats."

Warm-season annuals include sorghum-Sudan grass; cow peas; pearl millet, both brown midrib (BMR) and conventional; sunn hemp; and crabgrass.

While Glenn loves the quality of the annuals and the resulting gains, the soil lover in him is

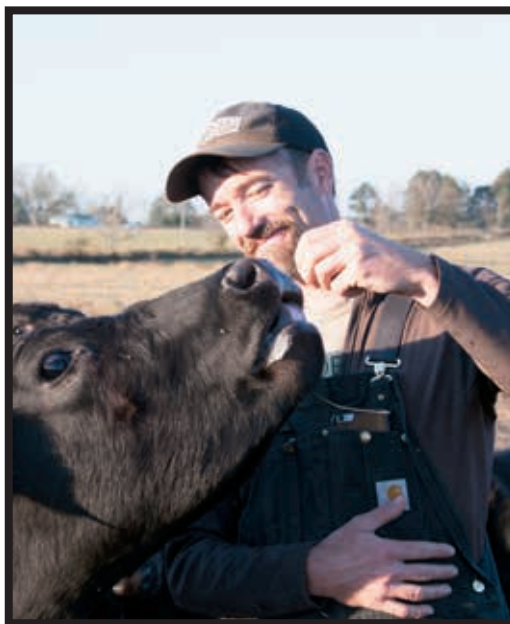


*Dan Glenn strives to breed heifers that thrive on forages.*

leaning toward the perennials.

"We started with annuals five years ago when we first converted it, but the more I learned about soil health, the more I admired perennials," he explains. "Three years ago, I planted the first paddock of Tifton 85 and now, a little more than half of the acreage is hybrid Bermuda grass."

He adds, "Tifton 85 outcompetes a lot of problem weeds. Herbicides are our last resort. Tifton 85 is also more



*The cattle are now accustomed to Glenn moving them often. They literally eat out of his hand.*

forgiving, and you get more grazing days from it."

With his soil quality, and weed control in mind, he is trying to move to no-till with his annuals.

When it comes to diversity of forages, Glenn is in a one-man debate over a monoculture vs. polyculture.

"There are no monocultures in nature," he states.

"I'm trying to pattern my grazing systems around nature. Polycultures provide a varied diet. Each species provides a different vitamin and mineral pack, and the roots of different species have different microorganisms, resulting in a more diverse underground microorganism system."

However, he says monocultures simplify management under his rotational system. "It is easier to manage a monoculture. One species is ready to graze at the same time, it recovers at the same time, and goes to seed at the same time."

To try to find the best of both worlds, he is no-tilling alfalfa in his Bermuda grass sod. He hopes the alfalfa, which likes cooler weather, will provide even more grazing days, add more quality and fix nitrogen for the Bermuda grass.

While UGA's Hancock agrees that multiple species in the same pasture complicate grazing management, he also agrees that a mix provides benefits. "Dry-matter intake normally increases with multiple species,

*Continued on page 54*

the cattle graze and take in more.” However, he says it can be a trade off with animal performance and stocking rate.

“Individual performance is almost always improved with multiple species, but sometimes it takes lower stocking rates,” he says. “A prime example is Tifton 85 Bermuda grass. It can grow

so well, the stocking rates can be extremely high. But, if you mix in other species like clover or alfalfa that don’t grow as rapidly at certain times of the year, we cannot sustain the stocking rates we get with pure Tifton 85.”

Although Glenn does have to make more complex decisions because of his grazing system and forage choices, his pivot helps take out some of the guesswork.

“For finishing cattle, it is ideal to have it so when you need high-quality forage, it is there,” he notes. “It is also good so you can water in your forages. With winter forages, it is all about timing. If I had to wait until now (the second week in November) to plant, we’d have lost 25% of our production.” As it is, Glenn had the ability to graze his growing animals on winter annuals by Thanksgiving.

While he does have the luxury of applying water when he needs it, he is working on reducing other inputs, primarily commercial fertilizer.

“I’ve stopped applying commercial fertilizer to some of my permanent pastures. If we need phosphorus and potassium,



*Dan Glenn strives to keep hay feeding to a minimum, but needs it in the fall when his summer grasses are going dormant and his winter forages aren’t ready to graze.*

I use chicken litter if I can get it,” he adds.

## Soil health

When he does need commercial fertilizer under his pivot, he spoon-feeds it at the rate of 30 units an acre through his irrigation system.

He says: “I’m trying to change the microbial life of the soils and forages so they aren’t addicted to inputs. Healthy soils will grow grass without inputs, but you have to get them there first.”

For the last three years, he has sent soil samples from his grazing hub, both in the annual paddocks and those with perennials, to a laboratory that tests for soil health and nutrient content.



*Georgia grazier Dan Glenn plants brassicas and oats for winter grazing.*

“So far, I have more questions than answers,” he admits.

The producer says he is going to try to be more consistent about when he takes the samples, as well as try to take them when forages are in the same stage of growth, so he can get more answers.

Even though Glenn makes every effort to keep green forage in front of his growing cattle,

there are times, especially with his brood cows, when he has to depend on hay or baleage. While he does bale peanut hay, Tifton 85 Bermuda grass is his go-to forage for hay and baleage.

“I’m not too happy with my summer annual baleage,” he reports. “The forages in the mix mature at different times so some are too wet while others are too dry.”

If he has excess oats or ryegrass, he’ll also make baleage from those.

In the fall, stockpiled Tifton 85 Bermuda grass is another good fit for his operation, especially for his January- and February-calving brood cows.

“Fall is tough,” says Glenn. “We’re coming off summer forages, but the winter forages aren’t quite ready.”

Kim Mullenix, Auburn extension beef specialist, agrees with his choice of Tifton 85 Bermuda grass for stockpiling.

“Tifton 85 has been shown to have a higher yield potential and good nutritional value,” says Mullenix. “It is slightly more digestible than older, less-improved varieties.”

In a two-year trial conducted

at the Wiregrass Research and Experiment Station in Headland, Ala., Mullenix says stockpiled Tifton 85 Bermuda grass averaged 60% total digestible nutrients (TDN) and 12% crude protein (CP).

Whether he is using stockpiled Bermuda grass for his brood cows, or grazing bulls to gain 2 lb. a day, Glenn strives to keep a balance and shoot for optimums, not maximums.

“We want to improve the soil health, improve the animals’ average daily gain (ADG), and increase the net profit per acre. Those things don’t always go hand in hand,” he explains. “I could get more




*Stockpiled Tifton 85 Bermuda grass provides good-quality grazing for dry cows.*

return per acre if I put out 400 to 500 units of nitrogen an acre per year. However, I believe that long term, soil resiliency and health are more profitable. That does make it harder to accomplish my yearly goals.”

Hancock hopes other producers will keep Glenn’s goals in mind, whether or not his production system will work for them.

“The highest productivity may not be the most profitable for you,” stresses Hancock. “The key is to recognize every farm situation is different and the economics have to be adjusted for every farm.”

Still, he says, “There are lessons to be learned from Dan in how he minimizes the need for stored feed and supplements.” 

*Editor’s Note: Becky Mills is a cattlegirl and freelance writer from Cuthbert, Ga.*

## *Consistent genetics for consistent beef*

When Dan Glenn came back to his family’s Fitzgerald, Ga., farm nine years ago, the now 44-year-old planned to start a farm-to-table destination restaurant. However, after looking at the economics of the cattle and row-crop operation, he found he needed to focus on improving the cattle program. He also made another discovery when he grass-finished his first set of steers from the herd, which he described as good-quality but mongrelized.

“The steaks were extremely inconsistent,” he says. “I’ve looked at enough marbling charts that I can say with comfort that plenty of the animals did grade Choice-plus to Prime. I’ve also seen animals of different genetics that would go Standard. You not only need high-quality forages, but high-quality genetics.”

As a result, the herd has evolved. Now, in addition to the commercial herd, he has small herds of purebred Red Angus and Herefords. However, his main purebred herd is Angus.

“I believe there are genetic lines of Angus that are superior at

turning forages into high-quality grass-finished beef,” he states. He believes these are animals that trace back to the original Aberdeen Angus.



*Dan Glenn focuses his cattle genetics to produce a high-quality carcass finished on grass.*

Glenn further narrowed his focus by crossing genetics from Maryland’s Wye Plantation and New Zealand’s Pinebank herd, both of which are linebred.

“The more I learned about genetics, I learned that linebreeding can fix traits and bring about consistency and predictability. Pinebank and Wye complement each other and produce a very profitable cow for the grass-fed industry.”

Glenn also maintains a purebred line of Pinebank Angus cattle in partnership with the home herd in New Zealand.

Now, he is gradually changing his focus even more to marketing registered cattle for use as seedstock, as well as using them in his own operation to sire the backgrounded steers he sells to grass-finishing operations, and the open heifers he grass-finishes and direct markets.



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