

Mr Johnson's

FOLLY

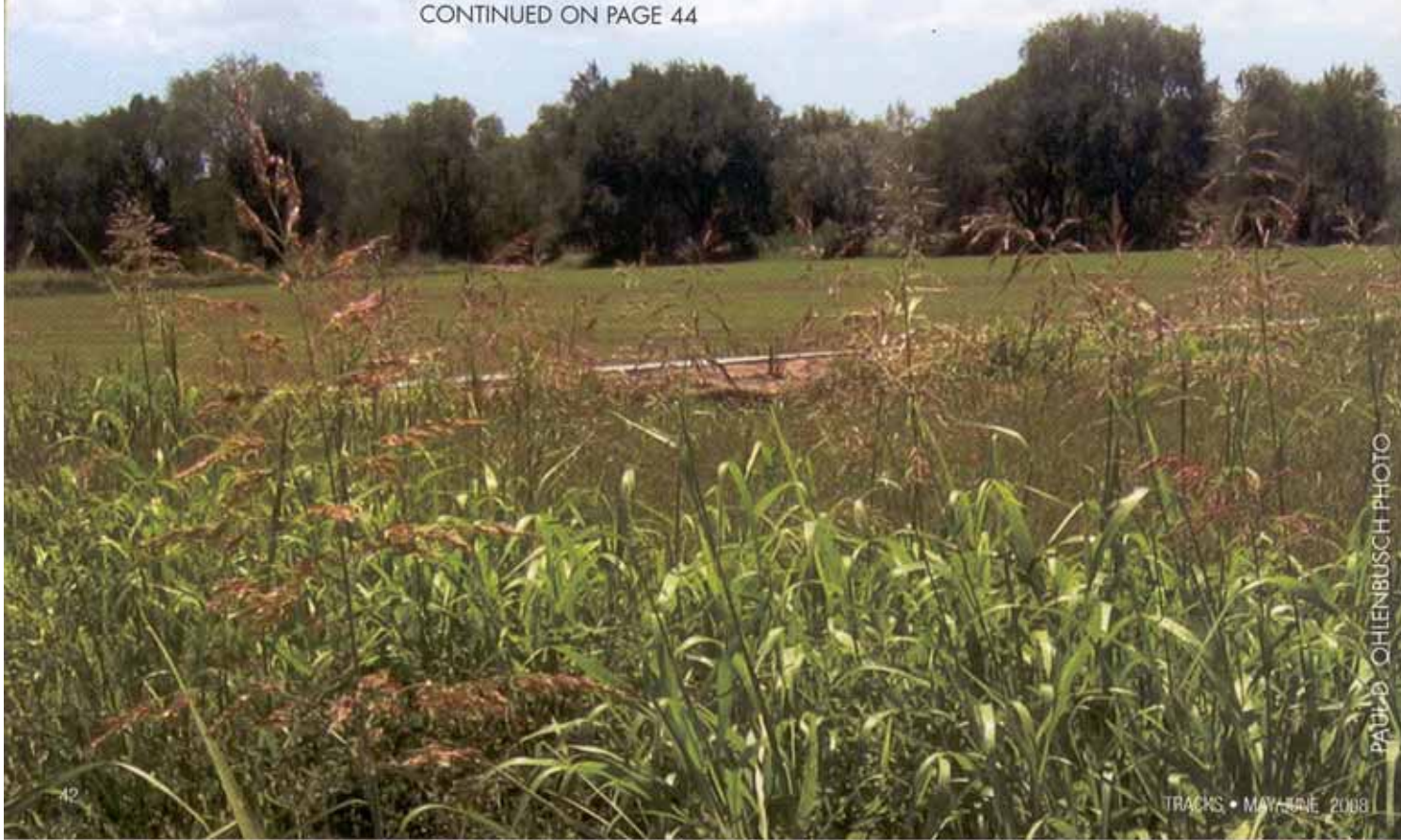
The use of Johnson grass depends on your situation

By Paul D. Ohlenbusch

This time the plant is one I am well acquainted with since I grew up with it and worked with it for most of my life. It is both desirable and undesirable depending on what you are managing, the weather, what kind of animal you are managing and your attitude.

Johnson grass (*Sorghum halepense*) has been around for a long time. It was introduced in the early 1800s as a possible forage or hay crop. The name supposedly came from a Mr. Johnson who got seed from Turkey and planted them on his southern river bottom plantation in Alabama. By the late 1800s, Johnson grass was considered a problem and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) started a control program in 1900. Today, it is found throughout the United States.

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MANAGEMENT NOTES



Evaluate rainfall history and current soil moisture status. If soil moisture is short, early to mid-season plant growth may be limited. Limited or no soil moisture can mean little plant growth.

If plant growth is excellent, avoid the urge to add animals to harvest the forage. Instead, let the plants have the opportunity to store food for next year, stockpile forage for fall and winter, and look to the future.

Central and North Texas—monitor for introduced and invasive weed and brush and plan control options.

Monitor water sources for needed levels. Develop options if sources are less than optimal.

Review and adjust grazing and economic management plans and adjust for current and past weather conditions, as well as changing economic factors.

Continue planning for 2008 and looking toward 2009. It's never too late to consider a five-year management plan.



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Johnson grass invades almost any site that is disturbed. With extensive rhizome production it spreads rapidly. If the rhizomes are planted, new plants emerge. Control is difficult. Contact your local Extension office or NRCS office for information.

THE GOOD SIDE

Johnson grass is a good forage. It can be grazed, hayed or even ensiled. There is evidence that cattle will suppress Johnson grass through grazing since it is very palatable, especially early. When hayed in the boot stage, it is equal or better than sudan or sudan-sorghum hybrids. Because it can grow quickly, Johnson grass can provide grazing or hay in 2-3 weeks after good rains during dry periods.

Johnson grass seed is used by birds. However, there is some evidence that some seeds are not digested and are deposited in a nutrient rich environment ready to germinate.

THE BAD SIDE

Where to start? Johnson grass can invade and replace desirable plants quickly. Any disturbance such as heavy grazing, short mowing or tillage can increase the rate of invasion.

REFERENCES:


Washington State Noxious Weed Control Board. Undated. Johnson grass. (http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/weed_info/Written_findings/Sorghum_halepense.html)

National Invasive Species Information Center (<http://www.invasivespeciesinfo.gov/plants/johnsongrass.shtml>)

Newman, D. Undated. Element stewardship abstract for Sorghum halepense. The Nature Conservancy. 19 pp. (<http://tncweeds.ucdavis.edu/esadocs/documnts/sorghal.pdf>)

Johnson grass can be poisonous from two sources: prussic acid and nitrates. Prussic acid is the precursor of cyanide and occurs in new growth of most species of the genus Sorghum, including sudans, sorghum and hybrids. It is found in new vegetative growth, including seedlings and re-growth following harvest or dry weather. Grazing should be avoided for at least 10 days after new growth starts.

Nitrate poisoning results when the plant is unable to utilize nitrates at the rate they are available. This primarily occurs when moisture for plant growth is limited. When high nitrate forages are eaten by animals, the nitrates are quickly moved into the blood and prevent the uptake of oxygen. The animal dies of suffocation. Testing plants for nitrates can be made through many agriculture laboratories and should be made on hay or before grazing during dry weather.

Next time it will be switchgrass, a native grass that appears to have more potential than just forage. 

Paul D. Ohlenbusch, formerly Extension Grazingland Management Specialist, Kansas State University, is now a grazingland and vegetation management consultant (www.grassbydesign.com).