

# Paille Fine

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**P**AILLE FINE is pronounced "pie fin" and is French for "fine straw." But paille fine has meant much more than fine straw to farmers and stockmen in southern Louisiana.

Paille fine is also called maidencane. Botanists call it *Panicum hemitomon* and they list it as a grass of the lower wet prairies in the southern coastal plain. Cattle don't care what the grass is called. Cattle just like to eat it whenever they can get to it.

Paille fine produces a heavy growth of leafy shoots from underground stems, and it often forms a mass of organic matter several feet deep. New shoots emerge in early winter and become three to five feet tall during the growing season. In mild years paille fine may stay green the year-round. Seed heads form in April and May but the seed is seldom good.

Nearly two million acres of paille fine existed in southern Louisiana in 1914 according to an estimate made at that time by S. M. Tracy, special agent for the U. S. Department of Agriculture. It is doubtful if there are more than a few thousand acres left now (Fig. 1A). The largest areas are found in the Lafourche-Terrebonne Soil Conservation District near Raceland and Houma. Areas of considerable size also occur in the Iberia-Vermillion Soil Conservation District, and patches of varying sizes are scattered up and down the coast.

Getting livestock to a grass that grows in wet places as it does often poses a problem. Barges, marsh buggies, and even a narrow-gauge railroad have been used

to get hay out of the wet paille fine meadows.

Paille fine is worth going after whether for grazing or for hay. It is one of the most important native forage plants in southern Louisiana. The high protein content of paille fine brought about its use, in the past, as an ingredient of mixed feeds.

Several landowners who use paille fine report that one acre of the best range will support an animal unit for a six months grazing season. Basis for these opinions is evident in Table 1 showing the protein and mineral content in paille fine leaves during the first six months of 1950.

Paille fine is a snobbish aristocrat and doesn't like to mingle with the common plants. Except where it has been overused it occurs in nearly pure stands, on organic or clay soils along the border between marshland and prairie or woods. When it is overused paille fine growth is invaded principally by alligatorweed, (*Alternanthera philoxeroides*), as shown in Figure 1B.

Although a few operators graze their paille fine all year, the common practice is to use the grass during winter and spring, with a rest in the summer and fall. This system is good in a program where improved pastures are available for summer and fall grazing. Winter and spring grazing works out well where steers can be bought in winter for early summer marketing. Good gains are made without additional feed.

Many landowners have expressed alarm at the depletion of paille fine. Soil con-

servation district cooperators, with the help of Soil Conservation Service field men, are now planning and applying measures that will help maintain and increase it.

While intrusion of salt water through

Meantime—attempts to drain or reclaim paille fine areas for cropland and other pasture have been made with little overall success. Except in a few cases, the cost of the operation and maintenance has made the job impractical.



FIGURE 1. A. Contrast between relict area on left and paille fine pasture on right which is grazed yearlong. B. Alligatorweed invading area on which paille fine is being grazed out.

TABLE 1

*Chemical analysis of paille fine for first six months of 1950<sup>1</sup>*

MONTH	STAGE OF GROWTH	N	CRUDE PROTEIN	Ca	P	K
Jan.	Young	2.29	14.31	.26	.26	2.26
Feb.	Young	2.82	17.63	.10	.22	1.78
Mar.	Young	2.71	16.94	.23	.12	1.40
Apr.	Young	2.83	17.69	.19	.12	1.58
May	Seedstalk	3.26	20.38	.21	.25	1.38
June	Bloom	2.60	16.25	.19	1.60	1.12

<sup>1</sup> Samples were taken at the same location on Delta Security Plantation, Raceland, Louisiana. Analyses were made by the Regional Operations Laboratory, Soil Conservation Service, Fort Worth, Texas.

the extensive canal systems has destroyed large areas of paille fine, overgrazing and drainage, and some cultivation have also taken their toll of the grass.

A few landowners, using paille fine as pasture, have controlled the depth of surface water, but only enough to make an area accessible to livestock. And, even if conditions make it impossible to use a paille-fine area for grazing and hay, such an area will still be valuable for various forms of wildlife.

The first measure, of course, is to regulate livestock numbers to the rate of grass growth. Next, improved pastures and supplementary grazing for summer and fall months should be provided wherever possible. This is the season when paille fine matures. It is also the season when marsh insects are bad. Occasional spring rests for overused areas will give the grass a chance to restore its vigorous root system. Where uneven use occurs, low levees and walkways will help livestock get into underutilized areas.