Cow-Calf Production

Now that you have had a view of what is involved in raising cattle, let's look at production systems. For most people with 10-40 acres a cow-calf system can be feasible. It is no simple matter, as should be clear from all the problems previously described, but it can be rewarding.

In cow-calf production you should select breeds of animals to suit your needs. Cross-bred heifers and cows are usually more productive than purebreds like Angus, Hereford, Charolais and Brahman. Crosses between small beef breeds (Angus, Hereford, etc.) and Brahman are especially good in Florida. Cross-bred cows containing two breeds will produce larger calves if bred to a purebred bull of yet another breed. For example, buy Angus X Brahman cows and a Hereford bull so you are getting three-way cross calves. Crossbred calves display "hybrid vigor," which means they produce better than you would expect based on the average production of the parent breeds.

Mother cows, often called "brood cows," can get much of their nutritional needs from pasture. A mature, pregnant cow not producing milk may need only about 15 pounds of dry feed or pasture containing 6.0% protein per day. After calving, she is providing milk for the calf and getting herself ready for rebreeding. Now she may need up to 22 pounds per day of dry feed containing 9.0% protein. You may need to give her supplemental feed in addition to pasture at this time, because she must meet her own needs and produce enough milk for her growing calf. This is the most demanding time in a cow's year.

Brood cows need access to a mineral mixture containing salt, trace minerals and vitamin A at all times. This can be provided in a box with a roof over it for weather protection. Supplemental feed for milking cows can be fed in a similar way to only those cows needing it. Always have clean, fresh water readily available. On a hot day a large cow will drink 15 to 20 gallons or more of water.

Breeding Management is a good place to start discussing cow-calf management. Heifers can be bred naturally by a bull or by artificial insemination (A.I.) after they reach about 15 months of age provided they weigh at least 650 to 750 pounds and are in good health. The cow goes through an estrus cycle of about 21 days length and can become pregnant only during about two days in the cycle. The period when she can be bred is called the "heat" period or "being in heat," and during this time the cow is nervous, jumpy, bawls a lot and will stand still to be mounted by a bull. If you choose A.I. then you must be able to recognize a cow in heat so you know when to breed her. If she does not become pregnant she will come into heat again about 21 days later because she will continue on the cycle. A cow which does not become pregnant after two/three breeding cycles should be checked by a veterinarian, and if she has a problem, she should be sold. A good cow will give you a calf every year.

Once a cow does become pregnant she will carry the calf about 280 days before it is born. You should decide when you want the calves born and then breed a little over nine months before. For example, a cow bred on July 1 should deliver about April 11 and a cow bred January 1 will calve around October 12.