



## The History of Sorghums and Sudans by Chad Hale

For thousands of years, livestock producers in moderate climates have had to deal with the lack of cool season grass growth in the summer. Warm season crops like sorghum and sudan have been filling that void known as the summer slump for many centuries. The Egyptians are thought to have used sorghum 3,000 years ago and sorghum appears in a carving from Ninevah, Assyria from 700 BC. The crops spread across Europe and then to America with the colonists and from Africa with the slave trade. Its primary use in this country was for syrup for human consumption but its summer growth was noticed and utilized for forage on a small scale.

In 1830, Governor Means of South Carolina is credited with importing Johnsongrass for forage and if you look in your corn fields today you can see that it spread really well! The first forage sorghum variety called Chinese Amber came from France in 1853 and its use for forage rapidly spread at that time. Shattercane is spoken of in accounts of early settlers and it results from the crossing of Johnsongrass and sorghum to create another aggressive weed problem. Sudangrass is a more recent introduction being brought to the US by the USDA in 1909 from Africa. A single row of sudangrass 16 feet long planted that year in Texas was the origin of most of the seed in the US for many years after that.

Even though we think of Johnsongrass and shattercane as weeds today, they were better than no forage at all and filled a feed niche in the hot dry summer that still challenges us today. We have come a long way with sorghums, sudangrasses and the sorghum x sudan crosses that have been bred over the last 50 years and we look forward to even more advances in the future. The most significant recent advance was the Brown Midrib Trait that was introduced into sorghums in 1978. There are now three types, gene 6, gene 12, and gene 18 BMR's with gene 6's offering the most improvement in digestibility. It's this gene 6 material that forms the basis of the Alta Seed program that Byron Seeds uses.