

Means grass (aka: Johnson grass, Egypt grass)

By Edwin Eugene Ott

While in Egypt, after the Revolutionary War, Thomas Means, the father of South Carolina Governor John H. Means (1850 to 1852), purchased hemp seed contaminated with a grass seed. The grass began growing luxuriantly on Mean's plantation in Fairfield County. The grass was considered excellent forage and grazing for cattle. John H. Means recommended the grass as a cover crop between cotton plantings. He was boasted that "Ten acres of bottom land set with Means grass on this plantation kept 70 head of cattle of all ages in excellent condition."

In 1840, Colonel William Johnson of Selma, Alabama went to visit John H. Means who gave him forage grass seed. Johnson planted the seed on his plantation and eventually grew large amounts of it for forage. The grass became known in Alabama as "Johnson grass."

Meanwhile, in South Carolina, the grass was known as "Means grass" and, after a number of years, as "that damned Means grass." The grass was found to be an implacable enemy of cotton fields. Anyone today who has this grass growing on their land knows how difficult it is to eliminate it from cropland. Means grass grows to a height of 7 to 9 feet and will turn a field into a thicket if not frequently mowed. The grass spreads by seed and root growth.

In 1850, John Means wrote one of his brothers living farther west, "It would be impossible for me to sell my land for any price that would be an inducement to sell, for the big grass has inspired such a terror that no one will even look at it."

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References:

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Johnsongrass. Penn State Collage of Agricultural Science. <http://extension.psu.edu/pests/weeds/weed-id/johnsongrass> (accessed May 30, 2015).