

Annual Forages for Fall Pasture

Kevin Sedivec, NDSU Extension Service Rangeland Specialist

Many areas in North and South Dakota are dealing with a shortage of forages due to drought conditions. Pasture has become short and grazing lands limited for late-summer and fall grazing. Ranchers still can incorporate annual forages, but they need to be seeded by the third to fourth week in August.

Annual forage options are limited, but the best options for fall pasture and potential follow-up for spring grazing in 2007 are cool-season cereals. Annual (Italian) ryegrass and triticale will provide forage for fall pasture, with annual ryegrass regrowing the following spring for grazing.

Annual ryegrass primarily is used for pastures and quick cover in erosion-control plantings. It is quite similar to perennial ryegrass, except it is an annual or biennial, depending on climate and/or length of the growing season. Annual ryegrass is a bunchgrass, with numerous long, narrow, stiff leaves near the base of the plant. It makes excellent forage for fall grazing and provides spring pasture the following year.

The seed should be planted 1/4- to 1/2-inch deep and in a well-prepared seedbed. Annual ryegrass should be seeded from mid-August to early September, depending on the location. Generally, a seeding rate of 35 pounds per acre or up to 1 bushel per acre is used, if seeding ryegrass alone. Begin grazing when the plants reach a height of 6 to 8 inches. If your goal is to regrazed the field next spring, remove the cattle when the stubble height is about 3 inches. Ryegrass will be ready for a second grazing period by mid-May and provide grazable forage until late June.

Triticale is a crop/forage species resulting from a plant breeder's cross between wheat (*Triticum*) and rye (*Secale*). It is planted for both summer and fall grazing, depending on seeding date. When seeded in August, it will provide excellent forage for fall grazing and may provide subsequent spring grazing, if weather conditions are favorable.

Preparation of the seedbed should be similar to that for oats, barley or wheat. Triticale should be seeded using a standard grain drill. The planting rate should be 28 to 36 viable seeds per square foot or 2 to 3 bushels per acre in a seedbed prepared the same as for wheat. Begin grazing when the plants reach a height of 6 to 8 inches.

Annual ryegrass and triticale require fertilizer for best germination and production potential. I would recommend fertilizing using a starter rate, or 25 to 35 pounds of nitrogen per acre. If you are establishing your annual forage crop on previously farmed ground that was fertilized and harvested a below-average crop, excess fertilizer may be available in the soil, minimizing the need for added fertilizer. Remember, annual ryegrass and triticale can accumulate nitrates under stressful conditions, so beware of high nitrate levels with added nitrogen fertilization.

Moisture will drive the success of your annual forage crop this fall. With timely moisture, the opportunity to grow annual pasture forage remains a viable option. If moisture remains limited, risk for crop failure will occur and changing your strategies will be required.

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