BEYOND THE BASICS

Advanced Cover Crop Series

COVER CROPS FOR GRAZING

Cover crops improve water quality, create healthier soils, and reduce erosion, but are often overlooked for their grazing potential. While grazing offers an opportunity to offset the cost of a cover crop, it's important to consider the characteristics of different species to ensure establishment and growth that provide adequate biomass for livestock.



WINTER ANNUALS

Winter annuals are cool-season grasses that thrive in cooler climates, like spring and fall seasons across the Midwest and can survive winter. Winter annuals, including cereal rye and winter wheat, are some of the most common cover crops grown across the Midwest.

WHY CHOOSE RYE?

Cereal rye grows early and fast in ideal conditions. Known for breaking dormancy early, cereal rye can get a head start, allowing for abundant biomass accumulation for grazing. Cereal rye has also shown considerably higher yields compared to other winter annuals. Winter wheat and triticale also offer grazing potential, but do not grow as aggressively.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- Cover crops provide a cost-effective grazing option while offering positive environmental impacts.
- Increased seeding rates and fertilization of the cover crop will help ensure adequate growth to meet grazing needs.
- Align your cover crop species with your cropping system to improve biomass accumulation and regrowth.
- Consider all factors. While some species may offer a high yield, consider regrowth and time required to break dormancy or reach maturity.

ALTERNATIVES TO WINTER ANNUALS

Harvesting corn silage? That's a great opportunity to establish winter-kill species like oats and/or brassicas like rapeseed, radish and turnip. These fast-growing species can produce good grazing potential in the fall with an earlier establishment window and adequate moisture.





SUMMER ANNUALS

Summer annuals are warm-season grasses that do well in the Midwest's hot summers. Common summer annuals include sorghum sudangrass, pearl millet, and Japanese millet. Due to their ability to handle warmer temperatures, summer annuals can be an effective grazing option following small grain production and preventative planting situations when ground cover is needed mid-season.

SPECIES FOR SUMMER

Sorghum sudangrass yields large amounts of high-energy, drought-tolerant summer forage compared to other species, and the risk of prussic acid (HCN) toxicity can be safely managed. Species like sudangrass and pearl millet are lower yielding but have lower or no risk of prussic acid toxicity. Japanese millet has been shown to mature early and withstand wet conditions, although yielding less than other summer annuals.

MANAGING PRUSSIC ACID RISK (HCN)

- ☒ Avoid grazing young plants under 18 inches and monitor regrowth.
- ☒ Remove livestock from fields for at least one week after frost.
- ☒ Avoid over-fertilization with nitrogen.
- ☒ Silage is the safest harvest method and can reduce prussic acid potential.
- ☒ Test forage when in doubt to ensure safe feeding.

Management Strategies of Prussic Acid Toxicity in Sorghum

https://shop.iastate.edu/cropr3199.html

LEARN MORE

Extending the Grazing Season with Intercropping Summer Annuals and Cover Crops

https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/farmreports/article/25551/galley/21594/view/

LEARN MORE

Evaluating Rotations of Winter Annual and Summer Annual Forages for Yield, Nutritional Value, and Economic Sustainability as Forage Resources for Beef Cattle in Northern Iowa

https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/air/article/17746/galley/15975/view/

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