



Cereal Forages for Spring Planting

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For many areas in Manitoba, 2019 was tough on forages. A slow start to the spring, record dry conditions, and a wet fall have left many wondering what spring 2020 will bring.

When forages go into winter with good root reserves and enough material to trap snow for insulation, they usually get a good start in the spring and provide adequate production with the right conditions. Unfortunately, in many areas the lack of production forced producers to take every blade of grass, leaving many hay and pasture fields in questionable condition for the start of 2020. In addition, the present forage shortage may force many to turn cattle out on pasture at the first sign of green, compounding the stress on forages. [Deciding When to Graze:](https://files.constantcontact.com/cc34cd19101/5711114b-e43f-40bb-8381-863d59aaa34e.pdf)

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Although it isn't an exact science, there's a good chance that over-grazed forage fields in the fall that didn't have a chance to recover before freeze-up will be slow to start this spring. Producers may be looking to supplement their pastures with annual crops to provide additional grazing and to give existing pastures an extended period of rest.

Another consideration for annual forages this year is a concern with producing enough forage to adequately meet the needs of the herd for the winter of 2020-21. Manitoba has had two years of drought conditions in many areas of the province and there is little to no surplus hay supplies left to get through another year without adequate production. Seeding annuals that can be used as hay or silage can help provide some additional insurance for enough forage next winter.

When choosing to consider cereals for grazing or hay keep in mind that because most cereals are cool season grasses they have greatly reduced yields when planted later in the spring or summer. Fertility is another consideration. Annual forages must be fertilized to reach their yield potential and fertilizer should be applied according to soil test recommendations. Nitrogen (N) is most often the limiting nutrient. For cool-season annuals, 40 to 50 lbs of N per acre is typically needed. Warm-season annual grasses typically require 40 to 60 lbs of N per acre applied at or near establishment with an additional 50 to 60 lbs of N per acre applied after the first month of grazing, if needed.

Cereals should be grazed or harvested at the proper stage of maturity to maximize their potential.

When annuals are cut or grazed at an early stage, palatability is high, protein is high, but total yield may be low. If left to maturity, protein is lower and total yield is higher.

Unrestricted grazing or continual grazing invariably wastes pasture. Trampling and soiling losses can be greater than the amount of pasture consumed. Even in the case of relatively pasture-tolerant crops, such as oats or rye, rotational or strip grazing will increase yields and improve quality of pasture. If oats, barley or triticale are to be used as hay or silage, adding of peas (50 per cent of total weight) may raise the protein level by two to four per cent.

Sidebar: Pasture-Tolerant Crops

Oats seeded in spring can provide pasture six to eight weeks after planting, and can be plugged into the system to provide extra pasture anytime from May to fall frost. Oats may be grazed lightly in the vegetative stage and left for regrowth and re-grazing. At the boot stage, growth is very rapid and unless rotationally grazed, wastage is high. Like most cereals, oats will provide some regrowth when pastured early. For hay, oats should be cut at the early dough stage.

Barley generally produces higher dry matter yields than oats but is not as palatable and is better used for silage than for pasture.

Triticale is another option. Some Mb Ag research show yields lower than oats or barley. When mixed with peas yields may be lower but proteins higher due to an increased percentage of peas in the mixture.

Legumes and Brassicas such as turnips, rape, or kale can be mixed with small grain cereal grasses. Most brassicas have high energy content even when mature and tend to maintain their quality later into the winter than the small grain cereal grasses. Blending these into your annual forage plan can garner more benefits than just forage yield from your off-season crop. Some of these include increased productivity water infiltration, improved soil health, better weed control, additional grazing, or reduce the need for inputs such as fertilizer. [polycrops: https://www.beefresearch.ca/research-topic.cfm/cover-crops-91](https://www.beefresearch.ca/research-topic.cfm/cover-crops-91)

Cereals work well but depending on your situation you may want to look at millets, corn, ryegrasses or consider seeding forages that can be used to extend the grazing in the fall or provide additional winter forage.

Other resources:

[Extended Grazing: http://www.beefresearch.ca/research-topic.cfm/extended-grazing-45](http://www.beefresearch.ca/research-topic.cfm/extended-grazing-45)

[Ryegrass Types for Pasture and Hay: https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/forage/ryegrass-types-for-pasture-and-hay/](https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/forage/ryegrass-types-for-pasture-and-hay/)

Annual Forage Crops for Manitoba:

<https://www.gov.mb.ca/agriculture/crops/production/forages/annual-forage-crops-for-manitoba.html#Harvesting>