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Selecting the Correct Forage Seed Mix

Getting the right forage seed for your operation is not complicated but it does require some thinking on your part. Just going to the local feed store and taking whatever seed that they have in stock may be a mistake. Renovating a field, either completely or overseeding, is a costly and time consuming operation and it deserves to be done properly.

There are really only two considerations in selecting the correct seed for you:

1. What do you want or expect? (purpose)
2. What are the limitations that you face?

Purpose of the Field

Everyone wants the highest possible forage yield but it is very important to specify how you are going to harvest that forage. In general, there are two ways of harvesting your field – either by using your animals (grazing) or using machines (hay or silage) – feeding green chop is similar to grazing in requirements.

Grazing

For grazing or green chop feeding, it is important to select species and varieties that are very palatable and nutritious *in the green state*. Palatability is basically the ‘attractiveness’ to the species eating the forage and is a combination of texture and taste. Perennial Ryegrass can be high in sugars and is well liked by most species. Orchardgrass, particularly those varieties with a low crown height, grazes well and regrows quickly. Timothy is a fairly coarse grass, fairly low in protein and is well-liked by horses. On the other hand, sheep and llamas prefer fine grasses such as Creeping Red Fescue and Kentucky Bluegrass. Most (older) varieties of Tall Fescue are quite ‘hard’ and are not preferred, in the fresh state, for pasturing. Some of the newer varieties are softer and can be effectively used for grazing. Pasture for horses has another requirement: that of sod formation for sure footing and to withstand horse grazing pressure (ripping rather than chewing action). Most legumes are good for pasture, but care must be taken to prevent bloat in cattle and foundering in horses.

Conservation

When you are making hay or silage, you are conserving the forage for later feeding. Here the ability of the forage to dry-down fully (hay) or to ensile (silage or haylage) is very important. Tall Fescue, Orchardgrass, Timothy and Bromegrass all dry-down rapidly for hay and haylage; Perennial Ryegrass takes longer to dry and is not suitable for hay-making. If making hay in your area requires numerous tedding and raking operations, this additional handling may mean the loss of many legume leaves, where the nutrients are concentrated, resulting in a high fibre hay. The ensiling process involves the rapid pH reduction (getting more acidic) of the forage; research has shown that crops high in sugars (corn, ryegrass, orchardgrass and alfalfa) ensile faster and more completely. Using a bacterial inoculant at harvest will help ensure rapid ensiling and cut the dry matter loss during that process.

Limitations

The area that you live in will determine how winterhardy the varieties used must be, how many harvests can be realized, the disease pressure faced by the crop, moisture availability, soil type and pH. Management limitations (frequency of cutting, fertilization and irrigation) are important to take into

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account when deciding on a mix. Here are some generalizations which can help in preliminary discussions:

Orchardgrass

- Requires good drainage and fairly high fertility
- Fast regrowth after cutting
- Excellent forage yield with high protein level
- Variety differences for drought resistance and winterhardiness

Tall Fescue

- Grows well in both poorly and well drained land
- Relatively drought resistant
- Good regrowth
- Holds colour well in hay – palatable in hay and silage
- Winterhardy varieties are very important

Timothy

- Very winterhardy – grows well at higher elevations
- Poor regrowth – majority of production in first cut
- Lower protein than Orchardgrass or Tall Fescue

Bromegrass

- Most varieties are winterhardy – not very tolerant of wet winters (coastal)
- Long lived but poor regrowth – can form a heavy sod (smooth)
- Meadow brome grass is a valuable pasture grass

Reed Canarygrass

- Very wet tolerant, slow establishment
- Can form a heavy sod – very persistent
- Not very palatable (unless harvested young)

Alfalfa

- Produces high quality forage
- Different kinds available (with differing winterhardiness, yield, regrowth, disease resistance)
- Requires good drainage and relatively high pH (6.2 and above)
- High tendency to cause bloat

Birdsfoot Trefoil

- Does not need as good drainage as alfalfa
- Lower yield potential than some alfalfa varieties
- Will not cause bloat

Formulation of a suitable mix involves a compromise between species or varieties to produce an ideal crop and the limitations, both geographic and management, to produce that crop. Hopefully this article will help you to narrow the species to those that will work for you; however, it is very important to discuss your requirements with a seed specialist familiar with forage production in your area to finalize an ideal mix for your operation.

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