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SELECTING SUMMER ANNUAL FORAGE GRASSES

If your hay and forage supply could be a little short this year, maybe summer annual grasses can help. There are many choices and what makes sense for one person may not work the best for another.

If you are planning to plant a summer annual grass, maybe to boost cattle numbers or to build hay supply, there are several ways to go. It can be confusing because there are six different types of major summer annual forage grasses — sudan grass, sorghum-sudan hybrids, forage sorghum (which we often call cane or sorgo), foxtail millet, pearl millet, and teff. Each one has its own strengths and weaknesses. So base your choice primarily on how you plan to use it.

For example, do you want pasture? Then use sudan grass or pearl millet. Both are leafy, they regrow rapidly, and they contain less danger from prussic acid poisoning than other annual grasses. Be sure to select a sudan grass variety that has low prussic acid and allow at least 24 inches of growth prior to beginning grazing.

What if you want hay or green chop? Then select sorghum-sudan hybrids or pearl millet because they yield well and they have good feed value when cut two or three times. Brown mid-rib (BMR) varieties of sorghum-sudan and sudan grass are typically more digestible and better utilized by cattle than the non-BMR varieties. On sandy soils, in the western part of Nebraska, foxtail millet maybe a better choice for summer hay. It dries fast, doesn't regrow after cutting, and handles dry soils well.

Cane hay is grown in many areas and produces high tonnage, but it's lower in feed value and dries more slowly after cutting than the hybrids or millets. Or you could choose teff for a really soft, leafy, high quality horse hay. It's a small seeded annual that requires careful planting. People are using it as a timothy hay replacement for horse hay. People across the country are excited about teff's potential as a hay crop for the horse market. In Missouri, growers are finding that it makes better hay than most summer annuals they've been raising.

Maybe you plan to chop silage. Then choose the forage sorghums, especially hybrids with high grain production. They can't be beat for tonnage or for feed value.

It's not so confusing after all. Simply select the one that is best adapted to the way you plan to use it. And, of course, pray for rain since even the best plans won't work without some moisture.

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