

WHAT'S IN A NAME

What comes to mind if I say forage rye? What about ryegrass? These words can mean half a dozen types of forage and they all are very different. Let me try to reduce the confusion.

The words rye and ryegrass cause much confusion. Rye typically refers to the cereal or small grain plant. As a forage, it can produce high tonnage but is coarser and less palatable than some other forages. Like wheat, rye varieties can be either winter ryes or spring ryes. Planted in spring, spring types grow tall and form seed but winter types stay short with only leaves. Planted in the fall, spring types grow tall but die over winter. Winter varieties stay short and leafy during fall, but survive winter and grow tall and form seed the next spring.

Ryegrass, though, is a very palatable, high quality forage grass. There are several types of ryegrass with variety differences within each type. For example, perennial ryegrass produces very high quality pasture but only lasts for a few years under most Nebraska conditions.

A bigger confusion comes from annual ryegrass and Italian ryegrass. Technically, they refer to the same plants but in the forage world they have acquired different meanings. Annual ryegrass refers to varieties that are used for turf and to varieties used as winter and spring forage in the Gulf-state region. Spring plantings in Nebraska head out and regrow very slowly during the heat of early summer, usually dying over winter. Italian ryegrass, however, is more like a biennial and produces mostly leaves while growing throughout summer and fall if moisture is available. Many varieties survive winter and then produce seedheads the following spring.

Still confused? Then be sure to carefully describe to your seedsman when you want to plant and how you want to use your grass. Then they can help you get the right kind of rye or ryegrass.

Dr. Bruce Anderson, Extension Forage Specialist
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
314 Keim Hall—East Campus
Lincoln NE 68583-0915
402-4742-2577
banderson1@unl.edu

