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Planning for the Upcoming Forage Year

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While forage crops may not always be the main product for most producers, they do play an important role in our production systems, particularly for those of us who own livestock. We take time every year to look at crop yields and pick the varieties of corn and beans to plant or take time with catalogs and sales to find the right bull for our cows. Don't forget in your planning this year to give time and consideration to forages as well.

Having a clear idea of the goals and expectations you have for a forage crop are critical to planning success. Some things to think through might include the how land, machinery or grazing infrastructure, and labor you have available match up with a particular forage crop's need. What is the true cost of production, including land, labor, seed, irrigation, and fertilization and how can those costs be kept manageable or reduced? Finally, how can the forage meet the final demands you have for it as a feed source?

Finding the right system to meet these demands can seem daunting, but the beauty of forage crops are the many species and varieties available. With maturity dates, growing periods, winter hardiness, and harvest options varying with each species we choose, there is lots of flexibility to mix and match and find the best fit for your operation and unique circumstances.

For example, a forage plan to provide some grazing to weaning calves in the fall and winter months needs high quality fall growth as a cornerstone. If these calves are backgrounded through the winter, a silage crop followed by an oat/forage rapeseed mixture might be a consideration. Besides providing fall grazing that is high quality and silage for a ration once we move to a dry-lot, the shorter growing season for silage means we can get our fall crops in the ground sooner. Timely planting is critical for ensuring the fall oats and brassicas have enough time to grow and produce biomass before cool temperatures shut them down.

Compare that with a producer who needs fall forage for dry cows and spring growth for pairs before turning out on pasture. Mature cows need more substance than quality in the fall when dry, but need both in the spring when nutritional demands increase due to lactation. In this case, a summer annual like sorghum sudangrass can provide lots of growth by early fall and either be grazed or harvested and fed later. Depending on land availability and the variety we select, there may even be an opportunity to take an earlier harvest in the summer.

Following this with a fall planted rye or triticale meets the second need for spring grazing. While we don't expect to graze this crop in the fall, planting early, ensures fall growth and provides plants a step up in the spring.

The last thing to consider is variation between varieties themselves. Often times, newer varieties have improved quality and production that may be worth shopping around for, though this isn't always the case. Days to maturity can be another factor to consider. Oats planted early in the fall for grazing might benefit by the selection of a forage variety, which has longer time to maturity than a regular grain oat. This expanded grazing window often comes at a price increase though and might not be worth it if planting later when shorter days and cooler temperatures naturally prevent maturation.

With so many species to choose from and variables to consider, this time taken planning ahead is critical for successfully utilizing forages in any operation. Lay out your resources, goals, and animal needs, as they occur over the course of the year then find the forage or forages that fit. Once the general plan is formed, take some time to look at species or variety options that could impact final cost or productivity. You'll find time planning is time well spent.

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