



## Ben Beckman

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### Plant ID

One of the most common questions I both ask and get asked can boil down to a simple premise, plant identification. Whether figuring out proper grazing management or dealing with a weed issue, knowing what species we are working with as producers is essential to make correct management decisions.

Knowing what is growing in your pasture is one of the first steps a good grass manager needs to master. From how and when they grow to what value they hold nutritionally, we can't develop a proper grazing plan without knowing what plants we intend to manage. Brome grass, a cool season species grows best in the spring and early summer, then slumps as temperatures rise. In contrast, our native warm season grasses grow best from June till September. If we don't know which species are dominant in a pasture, planning for the proper turn-in date and how to spread grazing out over the season is impossible.

ID can come in handy with problem species as well. Certain plants, especially in native range, can be toxic to livestock. Knowing what these species look like and being able to manage pastures where they are present so animals aren't tempted to take a bite can be the difference between life and death for a cow. Other species just pose a problem as aggressive weeds. If a new plant shows up and begins spreading rapidly, getting a positive ID will help in deciding what a good strategy is for controlling its spread. Mechanical control like mowing may have little impact on a perennial weed where a few years of preventing seed can really impact an annual weed's infestation. If herbicides are our go to for control, a fall application won't have much impact on annual weeds that have already set seed, but is the preferred timing for some perennial and winter annual species.

While being able to identify the plants in your pasture might seem like a daunting task, just familiarizing yourself with the top 5 or 10 most common species in a pasture is often enough to get by on. A resource like EC170 - Common Grasses of Nebraska and EC118 - Common Forbs and Shrubs of Nebraska have most species you might come across. You can inquire at your local extension office about getting a copy. For identification purposes, the nice thing about plants is their lack of mobility. You can take as much time as you need to really look things over and find key characteristics that tell one species from the next.

If you are still uncertain you can always bring in a sample or take a photo to your local extension office for help. Cheryl Dunn, IANR's Herbarium Curator and Plant Identification Specialist, offers these guidelines when it comes to photographing plants for identification:

- Send in multiple photos that include: all parts of the plant, several photos of the same plant, upper and lower sides of leaves, and special detail close-ups especially flowers and seedheads of grasses.
- Take a picture of a fresh specimen and try to include a ruler, coin or some object in the photo for scale.
- Make sure the plant is clear and obvious, not obscured by glaring sun or shade. Avoid lots of other "green things" and have a uniform background, if possible.
- Make sure your photos are in focus: don't get too close with the camera, be aware of your settings and the focal depth of your camera, avoid shaky hands, do not focus on the background, and for small parts hold them in your hand to help with focus.
- Zoom in when needed, but often it's better to take a photo at less zoom with good focus first, instead of zooming in with the camera.

Plant identification may not be the most exciting skill set for livestock producers to master, but knowing what species we are dealing with plays a bit role in proper management. From setting up grazing plans to controlling unwanted weeds, plant ID is the first step toward success.

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