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PLAN AHEAD TO USE COVER CROPS AS FORAGE

Suppose you want some fall grazing. Oats, turnips, ryegrass, and radishes, as well as some other plants can provide excellent feed. But no matter what you plant, it will take six weeks or more to grow very much forage. Planting after full-season corn or beans won't leave enough growing season to get much grazable growth.

So, how do you get more growing season days? Planting these seeds via airplanes or other means before the crop is harvested has worked, but only sometimes. Chopping corn for silage will certainly give you a chance to plant several weeks earlier. You also might plant earlier maturing varieties or hybrids, or even harvest a little early and dry the crop in order to gain more growing season days for the forage cover crop. With any of these options, though, you need to be careful that you don't sacrifice much production from your primary crop.

Also be careful about the herbicides you use on your primary crop. Some corn and bean herbicides have long residuals that can prevent establishment of late season cover crops. Other herbicides have lengthy replant or rotation restrictions that prevent legal use of cover crops as forage. So if you think you might plant cover crops later this year, be sure to only use herbicides compatible with your plans.

These herbicide issues also affect cover crops that might be used as forage the following spring. Cereal rye and other cover crops that survive over winter often can be established with planting dates too late to grow any fall harvestable forage, but it still may be illegal to use them as spring forage if planted during a restriction period.

There is lots of excitement about using cover crops as forage. Do your homework and plan ahead if you hope to use them in your operation.

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