

Managing Our Winter Annual Forages

Georgia livestock producers are blessed with the environment to grow and graze an abundance of forages during the winter months. With the recent rains and cooling temperatures, many local farmers are planning their winter forage strategies, and if good conditions continue we'll soon be planting these valuable, nutritious forages.

If you are new to using winter annuals you, probably like many, first want to know which is best. Of course, a county agent covering himself will start to answer with, "It depends." What forages are you planting these seed in to? Are you just going to graze or do you plan to harvest some hay? Do you put up dry hay or looking at haylage?

Personally, I look to ryegrass first. Keep in mind ryegrass is not the same as rye. Among our commonly used winter annuals, ryegrass out yields all others including wheat, rye, and oats. It typically is higher in crude protein and energy as well. Be careful, however, if you are overseeding onto Bermuda hayfields. Ryegrass often sets back the greening up of Bermuda grass because it is the latest winter annual to mature and so shades out Bermuda. Since cereal rye is the earliest to mature, it may be a better fit on Bermuda hay fields. Cereal rye is also the lowest yielding of our winter annuals.

Wheat is one of our most popular annual grasses in this area. Wheat matures about as late as ryegrass but does not yield as much total dry matter per acre.

Obviously, there are several things to consider in choosing a winter annual including mixing two or more together and including clovers in the mix.

Once winter forages are planted, management can dictate how much we get from them. One of the big factors is grazing. Yes, we can begin grazing when these forages are young, but should we graze them is the better question. Research repeatedly tells us that waiting to graze until these grasses are 6-8 inches tall will result in more total forage over the grazing season. Grazing too early can reduce total forage yield by at least one third.

These forages are also not equally tolerant of grazing. Ryegrass and rye are usually very tolerant of repeated grazing and regrow rapidly. The least tolerant are barley and triticale which are not as common in our area. Wheat and oats are somewhere in between the extremes but are a good bit slower to regrow than rye or ryegrass especially under continuous heavy grazing.

As you plan ahead for incorporating winter annuals, keep in mind the importance of soil testing and fertilize accordingly. All the nitrogen in the world won't bring the desired yield if pH is too low. Split applications of nitrogen can be very helpful in managing the growth during the season.

Finally, as you look ahead consider these recommended seeding rates for winter annuals. The lower rates can be used when drilled. For broadcasting the higher rate may be needed.

Seeding rates for winter annual forage species

<u>Winter Annual</u>	<u>Grown Alone</u>	<u>Mixture</u>
	-----lbs/acre-----	
Grasses		
Ryegrass	25-30	15-25
Rye	90-120	60-90
Wheat	90-120	60-90
Oats	90-120	60-90
Triticale	90-120	60-90

Please call the Franklin County Extension Office (706 384-2843) if you have questions or want more information on planting winter annual grasses.