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Forage Options Following Winter Wheat

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Many farmers in Ontario are experiencing shortages of hay and haylage due to an exceptionally dry spring and lower than average forage yields. This year's precipitation values closely resemble those of 2012, when many producers had to resort to emergency forages to supplement low forage inventories. There are a number of forage seeding options following winter wheat that farmers can use to produce additional forage. In addition, these forage after wheat options provide added cover crop benefits to the soil.

The most important thing to remember when seeding forages following wheat, is to get the crop seeded as soon as possible after wheat harvest to allow for the greatest amount of growth before frost. It is also important to get any volunteer wheat controlled to prevent competition.

Italian ryegrass after wheat is ideal when seeking a high feed quality forage that will produce a crop this fall, and potentially again in the spring. You can follow a spring cutting of Italian ryegrass with corn, corn silage, soybeans, etc.

Seeding a ryegrass type Festulolium would increase the chances of winter survival if there is a strong desire to have a spring harvest, while still receiving the high forage quality characteristics of Italian ryegrass.

Summer seeding alfalfa will boost forage yields next spring as the stand will already be established, but will not produce a crop in the fall.

Cereal crops, including oats, is the simplest option, and will produce a high yielding single cut harvest in the fall. There are also some double-crop cereal options including fall rye or winter triticale.

Choosing the best forage after wheat option will depend on environmental conditions as well as producer requirements for feed.

1. Annual (Italian) Ryegrass

Italian ryegrass seeding after wheat is a very good double-crop option. Producers can harvest it in the late fall (October), and again in the spring, provided winterkill is not an issue. Italian ryegrass is known for its high feed quality, palatability, and ease of establishment. Italian ryegrass will not head out in the seeding year, contributing to high digestibility values. When seeded in the fall, Italian ryegrass will usually provide some spring growth and can be cut once in the spring. Italian ryegrass is ideal for a high feed quality, fermented forage source including baleage or haylage.

2. Festulolium (Ryegrass type)

Festulolium is a hybrid forage grass developed by crossing Meadow/Tall Fescue with perennial/Italian ryegrass. They combine the best features of fescue and ryegrass into one species. Festulolium generally has higher yields, drought tolerance, and better persistence than ryegrass. In addition, they are more digestible, palatable, and exhibit better spring growth than straight fescue. A ryegrass type Festulolium would exhibit similar short-term yields compared to Italian ryegrass, but would be more likely to survive the winter and would provide longer growth into the following summer.

3. Summer Seeding Alfalfa

Summer seeding alfalfa won't provide any additional forage this year, but it will allow the stand to produce a full yield next spring avoiding the usual spring seeding establishment yield losses. When summer seeding alfalfa, there is a risk associated with the hot, dry conditions we experience in the summer months. Alfalfa seeds need moisture to germinate, so try and seed prior to an expected rainfall.



4. Cereal Crops

Cereal crops, including oats, provide a very high yielding, high feed quality forage option following wheat. Seeding oats alone is the simplest option but some producers may prefer to use an oats/peas/barley mix. Adding peas to oats will improve feed quality.