

Forage Extension Program

Why Grow Annual Forages?

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Many annual forages are used widely in the northern Great Plains. These include winter cereals (wheat, triticale or spelt), spring cereals (barley, oat, triticale, wheat or emmer), and warm season crops (millet, sudangrass, sorghum and corn). These annual crops are used for dry hay, haylage or pasture production to augment perennial stands of alfalfa, grass or rangeland. In Montana, the primary decision tools for selecting an annual forage are precipitation, growing season, and the intended use of the crop.

Since the late 1990's cereal forages have been grown on about 300,000 acres in Montana. "Hay" barley (hooded varieties developed specifically for dry hay production) is grown on about 200,000 acres, and 'Haybet' is the second-most planted barley variety.

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A new awnless forage winter wheat 'Willow Creek' is rapidly gaining popularity with ranchers. Willow Creek and other winter cereals typically out-yield spring crops, but have slightly lower forage quality than barley.

During years of drought, annual crops have routinely been used in Montana as emergency forage. However, another growing use of cereal forages is during the crop rotation break when an old alfalfa field or permanent pasture is renovated. We recommend that when an old alfalfa stand is terminated, a "grassy" crop is grown for a minimum of two years. For ranchers and other hay growers, cereal forages have proven to be a viable option during the rotation phase – high production and good quality. Cereals are useful to disrupt weed and disease pest cycles, as well as rodent problems.