

Forage Species Selection for Pasture

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It is important to examine your needs and goals when selecting pasture species. Pasture mixes can be very diverse or very simple. In most cases, there are positive results with a mixture that contains 4-6 species. If you are seeding an area that has two very distinct soil conditions consider using a different seed mix for each area rather than mixing a large number of species to cover the whole area.

Species need to be matched in maturity and adaptability to soil conditions. Also consideration should be given to how and when you want to graze. Let's look at a couple of examples.

Match Legumes and Grasses

Orchardgrass has excellent early growth and heads early. Once it has produced a seed head, subsequent growth remains vegetative. This is a real advantage in a pasture situation. In the fall it can be prone to rust, which makes it unpalatable. Orchardgrass loses plant structure after being frozen, so it does not work well for stockpile grazing. An orchardgrass field will produce good quality early season forage, but is not as suitable for late season pasture.

Birdsfoot trefoil is a short-lived perennial legume that is slow to start in the spring. Trefoil will be 3-4 weeks later than the early grasses and needs to have the opportunity to set seed at some point during the growing season. Trefoil is excellent for late season grazing and holds its quality in the fall better than most legumes.

Orchardgrass – trefoil is an example of a miss-match. In the spring, orchardgrass is early while the trefoil is late to start growing. In the fall trefoil holds its quality, while orchardgrass does not.

Good matches for trefoil would be meadow brome, reed canary grass or tall fescue. Tall fescue is not as palatable as other grasses, but holds its quality well in the late fall. It works better than any other grass for late season grazing and stockpiling.

Alfalfa and white clover are excellent pasture legumes that have good early growth characteristics and will match with orchardgrass. With these two legumes, bloat can be a concern if they make up more than 60 percent of the diet.

When making your species selection, consider the purpose and management you want for the particular pasture field, then consider species that best match these requirements. The forage section of OMAFRA Publication 811 "Agronomy Guide For Field Crops" gives a number of different species mixtures that can be used. The Agronomy Guide is available online or from the AICC at 1-877-424-1300.