

Consider Ryegrasses for Pasture Mixtures

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Annual and perennial ryegrasses are excellent cool-season forages and good additions to a pasture mix. Although called ryegrass, they are different from small grain grass rye.

Ryegrasses did not originate in temperate areas like Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, but from milder climates in Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Thus, for the Midwest they are not recommended for all conditions, as they prefer cool summers and have low tolerance for cold winters. However, they complement the growth of cold-adapted grasses like brome grass and Kentucky bluegrass during less cold periods. Ryegrasses are adapted to soils that are neutral to slightly acidic, moist, and have moderate to high fertility, having poor tolerance to heat and drought. Under ideal weather (50-75°F) and moist soils, ryegrasses establish rapidly, provide good yield in the seeding year, and are superior to other grasses in terms of quality and digestible fiber, making them a good option for grazing dairies.



Annual ryegrass – characteristic glossy leaves and high digestible fiber.

Annual ryegrass is a bunch grass with an extensive, shallow, fibrous root system native to northern Italy, where it grows as a short perennial or a biennial. In the Midwest, it is an annual due to cold winters, and is favored as a late spring/early summer grass. It responds well to nitrogen, and the shallow root system makes it attractive for erosion control. Annual tonnage in WI can average 4.13 tons/ac, with some varieties reaching 10 tons/ac.

Perennial ryegrass is used mainly for pastures and is predominant in northern Europe and New Zealand. In the Midwest, it is less persistent than other cool-season grasses due to its low cold tolerance. In northern MI, MN, and WI, it should be used for grazing or hay/haylage in mixtures with red clover where snow cover makes 3-year stands likely, with no extreme cold weather. Annual tonnage is similar to annual ryegrass at >4 tons/ac.

Ryegrasses, annuals or perennials, can tolerate continuous stocking, performing better under rotational or flexible stocking. Start grazing at 8-12" and graze it very low. It tolerates short defoliation; recommended stubble height for grazing or haying is 2-4".

Ryegrasses have quick germination, 7-10 days, and are excellent for frost seeding. There are several seed options. Consider traits like maturity, ploidy level, and disease resistance. There are early and late maturities for either species. Earlier and later maturing are usually blended to increase the growing season. When mixed, some plants will come up early and others later. If using only one type, late maturing ones maximize the growing season for the Midwest.

Select diploid or tetraploid ryegrasses. Diploids have two sets of chromosomes; tetraploids have four and are larger in size with wider leaves and tend to be more winterhardy; however, there are many diploid varieties with excellent traits. Ryegrasses are susceptible to common diseases (i.e., crown rust, red-thread, dollar spot, brown patch, Pythium blight), but resistant cultivars are available.