



Grazing cover crops



Planting annual cover crops in between cash cropping systems can produce extra forage and extend the grazing season.

Benefits to soil health

Roots from cover crops drive increased organic matter in the soil, but the manure from animals provides an important soil health benefit and improves nutrient cycling.

Other benefits

1

Cost Savings

Feed costs are one of the biggest expenses for livestock. Grazing provides significant cost-savings by reducing the need for harvested feed. By growing a cover crop on corn and soybean acres, not only do the harvested feed costs decrease, but the cost of labor to make and feed the harvested forages also decreases because the animal does the work.

2

Time Savings

The time savings can go beyond just feeding. Livestock naturally applies manure in the same place they graze. This saves time by removing the need to haul manure from a barn or lot to the field. When livestock are out to graze, there will be less labor time to clean the manure out of the barns. Rotational or mob grazing helps spread out the manure more evenly and adds even more benefit.

3

Extended Grazing Timeframe

By raising a cover crop with livestock as an essential component, grazing time and overall forage production can be extended beyond what a typical perennial pasture can provide. This can usually mean an additional 3-4 weeks, or even more in the fall or spring when pastures are dormant.



Rotational grazing, set stock and strip grazing each have their own benefits and can be matched with the type of species, management systems and season of grazing.



Grazing systems

Timing

Spring:

- Establish cereal rye, wheat or triticale in the fall for grazing in the spring.

Summer:

- Establish summer annuals, such as pearl millet and sorghum-sudan to be grazed before frost. These usually need 45 to 60 days before grazing and are best utilized behind wheat or other small grain crops. In general, summer annuals should not be grazed when frost is possible to avoid prussic acid concerns.

Fall:

- Establish turnips, radishes, and oats in the summer for grazing in the fall
 - You can do this by interseeding a cover crop in a standing corn crop. With favorable weather, the green cover crop is established and ready to be grazed after harvest and into the fall. Planting a soybean crop following the cover crop grazing rotation is a good choice. However, if grazing is limited to fall, any planting issues the following spring are usually eliminated.
 - Brassicas such as turnips and radishes should not be the only source of feed for cattle. They should be included in a mix or with another feed, such as hay, to avoid herd health issues.

Considerations

- One recommended rotation is corn – cover crop – soybeans. This also takes advantage of the corn stalks as a feed source, and soybeans can be more resilient to any compaction issues or later planting that may result from grazing.
- It is common to have logistical concerns, so it is essential to plan ahead. The cattle need water, a fence around the land, handling facilities, and a shelter for inclement weather.
- Animals should not be grazed on extremely wet ground as it can have negative consequences on the soil structure, such as compaction, and other issues for the following cash crop.
- It is also important to check your herbicide and other pesticide products to make sure they allow for your grazing plan.

Always be aware of any issues the cover crop species could cause as a feed source, including prussic acid in warm season annuals and bloat considerations in legumes.

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