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Alternative Forages  
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Alternative forages are an important topic in light of the 2012 drought. Many beef cattle producers need to assess what plants currently comprise pastures and hay fields and decide if changes are needed. Producers can use the winter months to gather information on forage options in order to be prepared to act when early spring conditions allow agronomic practices to occur.

Missouri beef producers are fortunate in that dozens of forage species can be grown in pastures and hay fields. The temptation is to be looking for some new, magic forage or potion that will improve forage productivity without the producer doing anything to change their management techniques. Unfortunately, most of these magic forages disappoint at some level. So, how should producers go about selecting forage types and varieties to improve their pastures and hay fields?

In true Extension fashion, I have come up with several questions that producer's need to ask when looking at forage options for their operation. This is not an all-inclusive list, but is intended to get the thought process started.

One starting place is to figure out if forage issues can be solved by changing how the current forage inventory is managed. Can improvements be made in grazing management, fertilizer management, or haying management? Are livestock production management changes possible and will they be helpful? What is the current level of forage management skill? Can new forage management skills be learned and implemented?

Assuming a new forage type can be properly managed, what determines which forage or forages are selected? The following questions come to mind. When is forage needed? What level of forage quality is needed? What is affordable for both establishment and maintenance of the new forage? Is tillable land available? Does the farm infrastructure exist to manage different forage crops and if not, what will be the cost to bring the infrastructure up to speed? Is there independent research data on the forage being considering?

As mentioned previously, there are literally dozens of crops that can be incorporated into a sustainable forage production system. Many times, the success or failure of these crops boils down to following simple, proven management practices. Select forage crops that fill voids in your current forage system, and have a proven track record of production and management requirements. Then follow those management guidelines.

This is a prime opportunity to make changes in the forage program on many farms and ranches. If you have additional questions, contact me at the Benton County Extension Center at (660) 438-5012, by e-mail at [schmitze@missouri.edu](mailto:schmitze@missouri.edu) or contact your local MU Extension Center. University of Missouri Extension is an equal opportunity / ADA institution.

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