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Headline: Alternative Forages

WARSAW, Mo. – 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?

Alternative forages may include the addition of cover crops into the forage system or renovation of existing tall fescue with one of the newer novel endophyte tall fescue varieties.

In the case of cover crops, water availability and fencing are two of the most important issues to figure out. Then consider when and how the forage will be utilized.

Determine if the goal is fall grazing, spring grazing, or spring hay or haylage harvest. Then select cover crop species that meet agronomic and livestock production goals.

If complete renovation of existing tall fescue stands is desired, begin the process well in advance of the expected seeding date. Soil test and amend as needed. Spring seedhead suppression of existing fescue is recommended. Determine which renovation process to utilize, and follow the recommended steps for that particular process.

As mentioned previously, there are literally dozens of annual and perennial forage 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.

If you have additional questions, contact me at the Benton County Extension Center at (660) 438-5012, by e-mail at schmitze@missouri.edu or contact your local MU Extension Center.

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