Using wheat for grazing

Source: Jimmy Henning, Chris Teutsch, Ray Smith, UK extension forage specialists and Tim Phillips, UK plant breeding and genetics

It may surprise you that producers use as much as 25% of Kentucky’s wheat crop for forage or cover crops rather than harvesting it for grain. Wheat is a very attractive option to forage and livestock producers because it is winter hardy, planted later in the fall and adapted to most soils in Kentucky.

Livestock can graze wheat as forage in the fall and spring. The crop performs best as a forage on ground that is limed to a pH of at least 6.4 or higher and fertilized according to soil test recommendations. If you plan to graze the wheat, splitting the nitrogen application between fall and spring will increase total forage production. Make the fall application before seeding and a late winter/early spring application to stimulate early spring growth.

If you plan to harvest wheat for a stored forage such as hay, baleage or silage, soil test each year and fertilize based on test results. Wheat harvest will remove nutrients from the soil.

If you plan to have livestock graze wheat in the fall, plant it in September or as early as your crop rotation and soil moisture allow. Be aware that this early planted wheat is at a greater risk for aphids, which can transmit barley yellow dwarf virus. Since the wheat is grazed by livestock when it is in a vegetative state, it should be protected from Hessian fly damage if only used for grazing.

Plant wheat used for stored forages after the Hessian fly free date in October. This date varies each year but most often occurs by Oct. 15. Plant wheat two to 2.5 bushels per acre and 1 to 2 inches deep using a no-till drill into crop stubble or by broadcasting seed and lightly discing the ground to get the seeds at the proper soil depth.

Wait to turn livestock into wheat pastures until the plants are well established and at least 6 to 8 inches tall. Monitor fields for wetness and trampling of plants by the livestock. This is especially a concern during spring grazing. Only allow livestock to graze plants to 3 to 4 inches and allow the forage to recover to 6 to 8 inches long before grazing again. Small grains fit well into rotational grazing systems as they recover and increase production similar to pasture grasses.

If you still want to get a grain crop from the wheat, only allow livestock to graze it lightly in the early spring. Do not graze wheat after plants reach the Feekes 6 growth stage, which is when the first node is visible above the soil surface and at the beginning of stem elongation. Grazing after this stage removes the growing point and prevents the seed heads from developing.

For the best quality stored forages, harvest the crop at the boot to early head stage. Early cut wheat will ensile easier because it contains higher amounts of fermentable carbohydrates and forms denser bales. Feed early cut wheat to livestock with high nutrient needs like calves or lactating cows.

Nitrate poisoning is very unlikely under normal plant growth and weather conditions. However, periods of cool, cloudy weather, hail damage, frost and drought can cause nitrates to accumulate in wheat. The ensiling process removes about 50% of nitrates and reduces toxicity risk.

More information on using wheat for forage is available in the University of Kentucky publication AGR 263: Growing Wheat for Forage. It is available online at <https://bit.ly/3eK5Z9x> or by contacting the (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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