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Small Grains vs Ryegrass for Winter Forage

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Small grains (oat, rye, wheat, and triticale) and annual ryegrass are cool season grasses which produce all of their forage during winter and early spring. In central Florida, these grasses are seeded in November and can be grazed within 6 to 8 wk after seeding emergence. These crops provide the most forage when seeded alone or in mixtures following a vegetable crop or in a pasture renovation program. Both small grains and ryegrass seeded in cultivated soils establish more rapidly than when sod-seeded. Sod-seeded ryegrass and small grains normally require twice the nitrogen rate and produce only 25% of the yield when compared with the same crop grown in cultivated soil (completely tilled). In fact the use of small grains and ryegrass in a pasture renovation program is very desirable. While ryegrass and small grains are producing winter forage the sod from the previous crop is decomposing, resulting in a seed bed about 80% clean by spring.

Most beef producers grow small grains and ryegrass for grazing purposes. However, many dairy farmers harvest their winter annual crops as haylage. The question most often asked by growers is which crop produces the highest yield, small grains or ryegrass.

A study was conducted during the cool season of 2002-2003 comparing several entries of rye, triticale, wheat, and oat with Jumbo ryegrass. Results indicate harvesting all small grains one time during the season (early head stage) yielded an average of 2.38 ton dry matter (DM)/acre compared with a total seasonal yield of 1.06 ton DM/acre for the two cut system. Chapman and Horizon oat and Jumbo ryegrass were the best yielding small grains averaging 3.2 ton DM/acre in a single cut system. Of the other small grains tested the better yielding wheat was AGS 2000, 2.8 ton DM/acre; FL NF94 Sel and FL P197P20

rye and FL 91142-A19 triticale which averaged 1.9 ton DM/acre. The average of all oat entries tested was 3.0 ton DM/acre; wheat 2.5 ton DM/acre; rye 1.8 ton DM/acre; and triticale 1.7 ton DM/acre when harvested as a single cut system.

Harvesting these same small grain entries and Jumbo ryegrass in a two cut system (first cut 12 inches tall and second cut early head) resulted in a 56% decrease in dry forage yield compared with the single cut system. Jumbo ryegrass (1.6 ton DM/acre), Horizon 474 oat (1.4 ton DM/acre), and AGS 2000 wheat (1.4 ton DM/acre) were the highest yielding entries in the two cut system. These data indicate that Jumbo ryegrass will yield as much forage as the better small grains in a single or two cut system. However, to get these yields in a single cut system harvesting must be delayed until March 10 for AGS 2000 wheat and Horizon 474 oat and March 25 for Jumbo ryegrass. Ryegrass will also grow better under wet soil conditions than small grains. To ensure the cultivar desired will be available you need to order seed in August. If additional information is desired call 863-735-1314.