

The Lowdown on Annual Ryegrass (*Lolium perenne* ssp. *multiflorum*)

Uses

Annual or Italian ryegrass is a cool-season grass often seeded to provide quick cover in erosion control plantings, or seeded into cover crop and/or annual forage crop plantings. With this variety of uses, it is important for producers and landowners to understand what they are planting when they include annual or 'Italian' ryegrass in their seed mix.

Description

- Annual or Italian: Name confusion occurs between annual ryegrass and Italian ryegrass. Both are used to refer to the same species (*Lolium perenne* ssp. *multiflorum*), but in the forage world they have different meanings. Italian ryegrasses are not true annuals. Under mild winter conditions, especially with sufficient snow cover, annual or Italian ryegrass can survive like a perennial. Time of planting, planting method, and soil fertility also influence winter hardiness.
- Italian ryegrass refers to cultivars that grow more like a biennial in some locations. They produce mostly high quality leaves while growing vigorously throughout summer and fall if moisture is available. They frequently survive mild winters and produce seed heads the following spring. These cultivars have become increasingly popular for thickening winter-injured forage stands, as a companion crop for seedings of new perennial forages, and as a temporary high quality forage or cover crop.
- Westerwolds ryegrass is more of a true annual that was developed from Italian ryegrass plants that set seed in the year of sowing. They can set substantial amounts of seed by mid-August, and usually produce volunteer plants in subsequent crops.

Both types are useful as an annual forage or cover crop and are often collectively referred to as annual ryegrass.

Adaptation

Annual ryegrass has a wide range of adaptability to soils, but thrives on dark rich soils in regions having mild climates. It does not withstand hot, dry weather or severe winters. It will also grow in fairly wet soils with reasonably good surface drainage. Growth continues later into the fall than most perennial forages and other annual crops.

Annual and/or Italian ryegrasses are distributed throughout the entire United States. It is native to southern Europe.

Seed Sources

Ryegrasses cross-pollinate freely, and many different types have developed. Pure varieties of Italian ryegrass are almost non-existent, so it is usually marketed as common ryegrass or domestic ryegrass, often a mixture of annual and perennial species. Conversely, certified seed of pure varieties or cultivars of **annual** ryegrass are available from commercial growers and suppliers. When purchasing seed for a new planting, it is important to understand the terminology and distinctions to make the best choice for the planned use.

Control of Volunteers

There are instances of glyphosate and ALS herbicide resistance in the ryegrasses. Contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county weed specialist to learn what management practices work best in your area. If using herbicides, always read and follow the label and safety instructions for each control method.



Annual ryegrass in Rolette County, North Dakota cover crop demonstration planting

Additional information on Italian ryegrass can be downloaded from the following USDA/NRCS PLANTS website link: http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_lopem2.pdf