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A Conservation Plant Released by the Natural Resources Conservation Service
Plant Materials Center, Pullman, Washington

'Covar'
sheep fescue
Festuca ovina L.

'Covar' sheep fescue (*Festuca ovina* L.) is a cultivar released in 1977 in cooperation with the Washington State University Agricultural Research Center and Agricultural Experiment Stations in Idaho and Oregon.



Figure 1. Covar sheep fescue seed production field at the Pullman Plant materials Center.

Description
Covar is an introduced cool season perennial bunchgrass. It is described as a dwarf type of sheep fescue with densely tufted blue-green foliage. Mature plants seldom exceed 23" in height and contain abundant fine stems. Numerous leaves are narrow, short, stiff, and basal. Panicles are short, seldom more than 3" long and strongly compressed. Spikelets are 3-4 flowered. Glumes are lanceolate and glabrous to scaberulous, mostly short-awned. Lemmas may be awn-tipped to awnless. Covar is shorter, more uniform, and has a deeper blue color than other sheep fescue selections. The name was selected to reflect its ability to "cover."

Source
Covar originated from seed collected south of Konya, Turkey, by H.L. Westover and C.R. Enlow in 1934. It was selected from test plots planted at Pullman (18" annual precipitation) and Lind (9" annual precipitation), WA, containing 63 individual sheep fescues from 15 countries. Covar was further evaluated and selected from spaced plantings for dwarf growth and uniformity.

Conservation Uses
Covar is recommended for controlling soil erosion in areas receiving 10-17 inches annual rainfall. It is well adapted for roadbanks, in terraces or diversions, as dryland turf, in waterways, on steep slopes planned for permanent cover, and other critical areas subject to erosion. Covar can also be used for waste areas and as an understory grass in range seedings. It is not intended for livestock grazing although it is palatable. In one 6-year herbage production study, it produced an average 850 pounds of forage per acre, as much as Idaho fescue, a native species. Trial plantings in WA, ID, and OR, showed Covar is an aggressive competitor that forms an attractive drought-tolerant, erosion-control cover.

Area of Adaptation and Use
In the Northwest, Covar sheep fescue is best adapted to all elevations in the 8-25 inches effective annual precipitation zones. It is a more desirable groundcover than Sherman big bluegrass, Durar hard fescue, creeping red fescue, and crested wheatgrass in 10-14 inches annual rainfall areas.

Establishment and Management for Conservation Plantings
Covar may be seeded in the fall (late October to mid-November) or spring. Fall seeding is preferred in low rainfall areas. There are approximately 700,000 seeds/lb. Covar should be seeded at 4 Pure Live Seed lb/acre no deeper than 3/8" on a firm seedbed. On critical erosion sites, seeding Covar alone requires adequate mulching and is not recommended without careful management. It is best seeded in a mixture with slender wheatgrass or crested wheatgrass to provide a quicker ground cover

on slopes since Covar is somewhat slow to establish however, once established it is very persistent, winter-hardy, and drought tolerant.



Figure 2. Mature Covar sheep fescue stand in a field planting at Pullman, WA.

Ecological Considerations
Covar is resistant to common turf diseases. No insects have adversely affected it to date. Covar is extremely competitive and may dominate companion bunchgrasses and other natives and should be seeded only when erosion and weed control are primary concerns.

Seed and Plant Production
Covar is a more prolific and reliable seed producer than Idaho fescue. Planted in 36-inch rows, dryland seed production at Pullman, WA, ranged from 300-500 pounds per acre. Maximum seed production is achieved the third year after planting. Seed does not have to be de-awned and is easily cleaned. Seed may be produced under dryland or with irrigation. Adequate isolation is needed from other fescues for certified seed production.

Availability
For conservation use: Covar seed is available from the commercial seed market.

For seed or plant increase: Breeder seed is produced and maintained by the USDA-NRCS Plant Materials Center in Pullman, WA. Foundation seed for commercial production can be obtained from the Washington State Crop Improvement Association.

Citation
Release Brochure for Covar sheep fescue (*Festuca ovina L.)*. 2022. USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Pullman Plant Materials Center. Pullman, WA.

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