

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet
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Oats for Fall/Spring Grazing



General Information

Oats can be used for grazing and can be planted in both the spring and fall. Oats can provide a very palatable, high quantity, of a moderate quality forage. Spring oats can be planted in the fall for late fall and winter grazing. Oats will continue growing long after they would need to be cut for hay. Unlike cereal rye, wheat and triticale that go dormant in the fall, spring oats continue growing until they are killed by several hours of temperatures that fall below 27 °F.

Oat forage is nutritious enough for sheep, dry dairy cows, beef cattle, and horses. Typically, they will contain 25-30% crude protein level from green up until jointing. The plants need to be at least 8 -10 inches tall before grazing. Protein levels will drop 14-16% as the plants start to head out. Planting spring oats in August can produce a large amount of excellent winter feed. Turnips can be added to the seeding to provide more energy for acres that can be grazed.

Fall Seeding

Grazing fall-seeded spring oats is a common practice in Illinois. Spring oats may be grazed in the autumn as soon as they have enough top growth, or they maybe stockpiled for late fall and early winter grazing. Fall seeding can begin the first half of August to ensure pasture is available in autumn. Later seeding can also produce ample feed for late fall grazing. Seeding rates for spring oats alone is 2 - 3 bushels per acre. If mixed with turnips and other cereal grains, use 1 bushel per acre. Fall seeding of oats can produce from one half ton to one and one-half tons of forage per acre.

Use a soil test to determine how much fertilizer to apply. Oats can utilize carry over fertilizer applied for a crop not planted or not totally used by previous crop. The nitrogen rates should range from 40 - 80 pounds per acre. Higher rates of nitrogen increase the amount of top growth available for autumn grazing. Phosphorus and potassium should be applied according to soil test levels before planting.

Grazing Management

Fall grazing should be delayed until plants are well established (6 - 8 inches tall). Oat plants grazed before this time will likely suffer from severe defoliation and result in lower fall production. On the other hand, excessive delay will result in rank, succulent plants, which are easily damaged during grazing. For continued growth in the fall and spring, stocking rate should be light enough to avoid continuous complete removal of top growth (graze to about 2-3 inches). Rotational grazing has been shown to increase production of oats similar to perennial grass pastures.



Spring Seeding

Spring-seeded oats make excellent pasture in the spring and summer. Seeding rates and fertility are similar to those in the fall. Start grazing the plants when they are 8 - 10 inches tall graze down to 2 - 3 inches tall, and rest for three to four weeks between grazing. Application of nitrogen after grazing will help increase future production.

Maximize Fall Yields

Seeding a fall mixture of spring oats, turnips, and cereal rye will help maximize total forage yields. The spring oats and turnips will produce excellent fall growth and then if the crop is rotational grazed, the cereal rye will be available for spring growth. Annual ryegrass maybe used in place of the cereal rye.



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