

## Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

SPECIES • COOL-SEASON GRASSES

# Tall Fescue



### General Use

Tall fescue is widely used as forage, but it also is ideal for waterways, ditch and pond banks, farm lots and lanes.

Animals readily graze fescue during April, May, early June and again in the fall, but show reluctance during most of June, July and August. Fescue is one of the best cool-season grasses available for accumulating growth for fall and winter providing much of the fall and winter feed for a beef herd.

Tall fescue should be part of a forage system, where adapted. Fescue should be rested during the late summer, so the growth can accumulate for fall and winter. If fescue is grazed in the summer, every effort should be made to maintain at least 30% of a legume species.

Tall fescue may be used in forage programs for most beef herds but is not recommended for use as a forage for dairy cows. See management for additional precautions.

### Adaptability

Tall fescue is well adapted to the soil and weather conditions of Illinois. Fescue is especially adapted to the growing conditions of southern Illinois, producing more on acid, wet soils of sandstone and shale origin than other cool-season grasses.

Fescue is one of the more drought-resistant field plants grown in Illinois and will maintain itself under rather limited fertility conditions.

Varieties suggested for Illinois are Illinois 96, Kentucky 31, Alta, Kenmont and Fawn. Fawn matures about a week earlier than Kentucky 31, and has excellent seeding vigor, but is somewhat more susceptible to leaf diseases. Kenmont matures a few days later than Kentucky 31, and produces slightly more during the summer. Of those, Illinois 96 may be the best option since being free of endophyte, a fescue fungus that greatly effects grazing animals.

### Establishment

Because of differences in growth habits, palatability and the time of year when they should be used, unless a good pasture rotation is planned, other grasses should not be included with tall fescue at seeding time. However, one or two legumes should be used in the seeding mixture with fescue but can only be maintained with good grazing management. The legumes will furnish high quality forage serve as a source of nitrogen for the fescue, and dilute endorphyte effects.

Fescue and accompanying legumes - except for lespedeza, which should be seeded in the winter or early spring - may be seeded in the spring, fall or winter. Spring seedings should be made early to avoid annual weeds and early summer droughts. Fall seedings usually have far less weed competition and more favorable moisture conditions than late spring seedings. See your local Natural Resources Conservation Service or Extension office for best seeding dates and current recommended seeding rates.

Test soil before making a new seeding. Several alternative fertility plans will be included with the soil test report. Select the one that best fits the individual situation.

Fescue has limited response to rock phosphate. Unless legumes are to be maintained with the fescue, only processed phosphate should be used to meet the phosphorus requirements.

A liberal supply of processed phosphorus helps to promote root development and plant establishment. While small amounts of nitrogen and potash are also of benefit at seeding time, too high a concentration of these elements will interfere with germination and discourage inoculation of the legumes.

The starter fertilizer is more effective when banded into the soil rather than broadcast.

### Management

Fescue may be infected with an endophyte fungus. Due to the fungus, animal performance is not as high on fescue as on most other cool-season grasses during the summer. Under these conditions, maintaining a legume with the fescue dilutes the level of ingested fungus. Incorporating a legume also increases forage production during the summer. Fungus-free varieties, such as Illinois 96, Mozark and Martin also lessen the problem.

Legumes are difficult to maintain in a fescue sod, but there are a number of management practices that help to prevent legume disappearance from the Mixture.

Good management of both tall fescue and cattle grazing is important to minimize fescue foot, summer slump and other diseases found in cattle that graze fungus-infected tall fescue. Pastures comprised of tall fescue and legumes have less trouble than pure stands of tall fescue.

Fescue has more resistance to low temperatures than orchard grass, brome grass, timothy or reed canary grass. Leaves remain green later into the winter than other pasture grasses.

Despite the retention of leaves, fescue grows very little after October 15 in Illinois. If fescue produces up to its potential, 60 to 70 percent of its total production will occur by July 1. Most of the later growth occurs in August and September. Therefore, nitrogen fertilizer to stimulate fall growth on straight fescue sods should be applied in the late summer. Dry matter produced after August 1 in several Illinois trials indicate that 30-60 pounds of nitrogen would be enough to encourage optimum production during the late summer.

The greatest benefits for stockpiling fescue occur, from nitrogen; however, don't forget phosphorus and potassium. Soil testing is the best way to determine phosphorus and potassium needs. When fertilizing fescue intended for fall and winter use, remember to keep the ration of nitrogen high and to apply it by August 15 so that the fescue has an opportunity to use the nitrogen.

To get the best results from stockpiled fescue, the early spring or elongated growth should be removed by haying or clipping by June 1. Many producers harvest a seed crop from the fescue and then stockpile the re-growth for winter use. If a good seed crop is desired the following year, clipping the fescue soon after seed harvest is essential. Removing excess growth after seed harvest will improve quality of fall stockpiles.

If pure fescue stands are used for hay, high yields can be expected if fertilizer - especially nitrogen - is applied during the winter or very early spring. Fescue to be used for hay should receive at least 60 pounds of nitrogen during winter. Phosphorus and potassium may be applied anytime during the year.

Fescue will withstand closer grazing and more abuse than most cool-season grasses. But can be overgrazed to the point that vigor as well as production is reduced. Don't graze closer than three or four inches and allow at least 30 days for the fescue to recover.

### Where to Get Help

For more information about tall fescue, contact your local office of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, listed in the telephone directory under "U.S. Government," or the University of Illinois Extension.



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