

Growing Tall Fescue for Forage

Area of Adaption

The extensive and rapid acceptance of tall fescue (*Festuca arundinacea*) since 1950 is a result of its wide adaption and valuable qualities as a pasture grass. Tall fescue is adapted to a wide range of climatic conditions and is heavily used in the central and southeastern United States. It is the only cool-season grass that can persist in many parts of the south.

Large quantities of tall fescue are produced for seed in Oregon, in addition to its use as a pasture grass throughout Washington and Oregon. Tall fescue, one of the most drought-tolerant forage grasses, is also tolerant of poor drainage, alkalinity, and salinity.

Primary Use

Tall fescue is used widely for forage, turf, and conservation purposes. It is the predominant cool-season grass in many states, where it is used extensively in pastures. Tall fescue produces most abundantly under irrigation and high fertility. It is tolerant of continuous close grazing and is superior to many other cool-season grasses in livestock-carrying capacity.

Tall fescue also can be used as a hay crop. When used for hay, tall fescue should be harvested when the first seed heads begin to appear.



Use	Precipitation	Tall fescue seeding rate	Companion species	Companion species seeding rate
	<i>Inches</i>	<i>Lbs/A</i>		<i>Lbs/A</i>
Pasture	< 40	15	Subclover	7
	40-60	15	Subclover	7
		15	White clover	2-3
	> 60	15	Big trefoil	2
		15	White clover	2-3
Wetland or irrigated pasture		15	White clover	2-3
		15	Birdsfoot trefoil	6
Hay	40-60	12		
		12	Red clover	8
	> 60	12	White clover	2-3

Varieties

Fawn and Alta are varieties of tall fescue that have been recommended in Oregon for many years. Kentucky 31 and Demeter have produced well in recent variety test evaluations. Kenhy, a ryegrass-fescue hybrid with improved palatability, has also performed well in these tests.

Establishment

When established, tall fescue has vigorous growth, but its seedling growth and establishment are somewhat slow. Therefore, a clean, firm seedbed is most desirable. Seed should be planted from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ inch deep, depending upon soil conditions. Tall fescue can be seeded either in late summer (before the fall rains start) or in spring. Better legume stands, however, usually are obtained with spring planting.

Fertility and pH Requirements

Tall fescue does best on soils of high fertility, but it is not difficult to establish under rather adverse soil conditions. It will establish on soils of low pH and will do well on a variety of soil types. Liming and fertilizing, on the basis of soil test information, are essential for a good stand of

legume and will be satisfactory for good tall fescue growth. Specific recommendations may be obtained from OSU Fertilizer Guides 1, 16, 28, and 58.

Management

Since tall fescue is rather slow to establish, new stands can be seriously damaged by overgrazing or grazing too soon. However, close grazing of well-established stands is a good management practice. Tall fescue will withstand heavy grazing for short periods. Under irrigation and a rotational system of grazing, tall fescue recovers well. For best production and longevity, however, tall fescue should not be grazed closer than 2 inches.

The addition of a legume to tall fescue plantings increases the palatability and nutritive value of the pasture. Legume addition, however, makes managing these pastures more difficult as the legume will be selectively grazed. Unless livestock are forced to use the tall fescue through rotational grazing, the legume will be removed by overgrazing.

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