

Feed crops made easy

by Izak Hofmeyr

Good fodder is critical for any livestock farmer. In this article two pasture specialists, Rüdi Kuschke and Jan Meyer of K₂Agri, give guidelines regarding the most popular fodder crops in South Africa.

Hay crops

Teff: Teff is a silage that makes for easy haymaking. It is easily established, grows fast, cuts easily and dries quickly, so that it can often be baled on the same day. Animals like the taste of teff. It is also economic when it comes to fertilisation. It does well as a rotation crop. It is mainly produced on the Highveld, in areas with a rainfall of 600 mm per year and more.

Lucern: Lucern is regarded as an irrigation crop. Lucern has different dormancy classes, which give an indication of the cultivar's sensitivity to cold temperatures. The best time to plant is autumn. Once a lucern field has reached its production limit, it must be replaced with a follow-up crop. Never replant lucern on an existing lucern field. The plant gives off a toxin that inhibits the germination of lucern seed. Teff is the ideal follow-up crop.

Weeping love grass (Oulandsgras): Weeping love grass is easy to cut, dry and bale, but it has little value as standing hay during winter. Therefore, the farmer keeps the first two cuts for himself, and fertilises and sells the third. The first cut he keeps aside for his highest producing cows and the second cut for the cows in later lactation.

Smutsfinger grass: Smutsfinger grass grows best in warmer regions. It can take up to 18 months before there is any really good production. Smutsfinger must be allowed to go to seed once a year. Make hay towards the end of November or beginning of December, and then leave the second growth to go to seed.

Foxtail buffalo grass (Bloubuffel): Foxtail buffalo grass grows at its best in the warm parts of the world where rainfall is low. The lower parts of the plant easily become rough and thick, which could injure animals' gums. Therefore it must be grazed short. It makes a good hay if it is cut down short.

Cowpeas: In dry areas, cowpeas can be used as silage crops. Its hay is similar to lucern. However, the haymaking process is labour intensive, which makes it a difficult hay crop.

Rhodes grass: Rhodes grass is a good hay crop that is easy to establish and grows quickly. It is a good grass to establish together with Smutsfinger grass, as it does not have a long lifespan – by the time the Smutsfinger grass is well-established, the Rhodes grass has reached the end of its lifespan. Although the fields cannot be grazed at that stage, hay can be cut.

Silage crops

Maize: Maize remains the best possible silage crop. Quick growers produce more grain, relative to the vegetative (leaves, stalks and roots) material, while longer growers produce more vegetative material.

Sweet sorghum: Sorghum silage is ideal for cows in later lactation. Sorghum can be produced under less favourable conditions. In terms of tonnage, it has an advantage above maize, but when it comes to quality, it is no match for maize. The best fields will be used for maize silage, while the rest will be planted with sorghum. Sorghum can also be planted later.



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- 1 Lucern is an irrigation crop with different dormancy classes
- 2 Sorghum can be produced under less favourable conditions and is an ideal silage for cows in later lactation
- 3 Clovers are perennial and are usually planted in combination with other pastures such as kikuyu
- 4 Kikuyu is usually planted in combination with other crops and needs a lot of water
- 5 Ryegrass is the crop used most often as pasture for dairy cows
- 6 Japanese radishes provide excellent grazing during the winter months

Canola: In the winter rainfall areas, canola is the best option. Palatability (taste) for cows may be a problem because of its cabbage taste. The taste is not noticeable in milk. The best option is to mix canola silage with another silage such as maize. Because canola is a winter crop, it can be established in irrigated maize fields. Canola is a very good rotation crop that counteracts root-rot.

Roundbale silage: Any crop can be wrapped in plastic and ensiled, as long as the stems are not too hard and do not press holes in the plastic. A benefit of plastic ensiling is that any overproduction can be preserved for later use.

Pasture crops

Japanese radishes: Japanese radishes provide excellent grazing during the winter months. The current trend is to utilise leaf growth rather than tubers. Plant density is very high – up to 25 kg per ha. It is the ideal crop to establish on silage fields for winter grazing.

Oats: Once oats have gone to seed, its lifespan is over. There are two types of oats: Quick growers for haymaking and silage, and long growers for grazing. If you want oats ready for grazing in winter, you must make sure that you plant it in time.

Annual ryegrass: Ryegrass is the crop used most often as pasture for dairy cows. There are annual and perennial ryegrasses. Among annuals there are the Westerwolds and Italian varieties. Westerwolds are more resistant to cold. Its lifespan is shorter than Italian ryegrass. A combination of the two types is the best strategy.

Perennial ryegrass: Perennial ryegrass can be divided into three groups, namely early, medium and late types. Select a type that gives you grazing when you need it. Perennial ryegrass is most effective in our mist belt regions. If it is planted outside its natural zone, its lifespan (of no more than three years) is shortened. Continuous sowing of new seed is required.

Stooling rye: This is an annual pasture crop. It is a slow rye that grows throughout winter and will produce as much as four grazings. The fibre content of rye is high and it is more resistant to drought.

Kikuyu: Kikuyu plays an important role in our country's bigger pasture regions. In most cases it is planted in combination with other crops. It needs a lot of water and its growing season is from November to February. During the rest of the year, other crops such as ryegrass are planted among the kikuyu. One of its biggest benefits is that it stabilises soil against slopes.

Clovers: Clovers are perennial and are mainly planted in combination with other pastures, such as ryegrass and kikuyu. Red clovers are fast growers and provide grazing quickly, but have a short lifespan – after two or three years the red clovers start disappearing. Then the white clovers take over. A mixture of the two types is advised. [LUM](#)