

Choosing an Annual Ryegrass Variety as a Cover Crop in the Midwest

Annual ryegrass is a vigorous cool season grass with an extensive, fibrous root system. Because of the number of annual ryegrass types, there is some confusion when it comes to choosing the right one for use as a cover crop for corn or soybeans in the Midwest.

Ryegrass includes both perennial and annual species, and there are diploid and tetraploid varieties of each. Sometimes, annual ryegrass is called "Italian" or even "Westerwold." These are, in fact, part of an evolving spectrum of the species (*Lolium multiflorum*). In any case, making a variety selection comes down to a few practical guidelines, summarized below.

When choosing annual ryegrass for a cover crop, here are some things to remember:

- **Select a variety that has been tested in the Midwest.** Ask whether the seed you're buying has been tested in variety trials, or has been used successfully for at least 2-3 years on farms in the Midwest.
- **Choose a variety with adequate winter hardiness for Midwest conditions.** Even ryegrass varieties suitable for the Midwest must be planted early to survive the winter.
- **Plant a named variety.** Some annual ryegrass is sold as VNS (variety not stated) or as common annual ryegrass. Stick with a named variety with a track record.
- **Plant a diploid variety.** Some tetraploid varieties are less winter hardy and more difficult to control than diploid varieties. Tetraploid varieties, commonly used in forage production, have not yet been adequately tested for use as cover crops.
- **In general, avoid the use of annual ryegrass blends.** Varieties vary in how fast they establish, in winter hardiness and in when they begin to grow in the spring. Variation in growth stage and size can make timing of the burn-down spray more difficult.
- **Important agronomic characteristics:** winter hardiness, good rooting depth, uniform growth for spring burn-down and minimal volunteer carryover. There is a possibility that some seed will not germinate when planted, germinating instead in the spring or the following fall. It could be terminated in the fall or left as a "free" cover crop if there is enough of a stand.
- **Buy from a reputable seed source.** Oregon is the world's leading producer of quality annual ryegrass seed. Seed produced in Oregon has consistently high germination and quality. Work with known varieties and known seed companies.



Annual ryegrass planted in the fall, growing in corn stubble.



Corn growing in annual ryegrass residue following timely burn-down.

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