Wheat for Grain and Pasture

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Wheat is an excellent fall and spring pasture high in protein and digestibility. Removal of the fall top growth of wheat in no way reduces next year's grain production if properly managed. In some cases, grazing lush fall growth will increase grain yields because it reduces the damage from snow mold and leaf disease.

Variety of wheat to seed. Any variety of wheat seeded at normal seeding time may be used for pasture. However, maximum fall forage production can be expected if wheat is seeded three to four weeks prior to the Hessian fly-free date. Wheat is a cool season crop and little additional forage or grain will be produced if it is seeded earlier than this. If wheat is seeded before the local fly-free date, seed only varieties that are resistant to the prevalent races of Hessian fly. Normal seeding rates of wheat are recommended regardless of the time of seeding.

Fertilization. Under normal conditions the amount of forage produced in the fall usually depends upon the amount of nitrogen used in the starter fertilizer. Twenty-five to 30 pounds of nitrogen should be used at seeding time for top forage production. About one-third more phosphate and potash should be applied for forage than for grain. Spring or late winter application of nitrogen should be the same as for a grain crop.

Management of fall growth. Wheat may be pastured in the fall from the time leaves are about 6 inches long. Avoid trampling during wet weather. In the northern part of Indiana, wheat should regain 2 or 3 inches of top growth before going into the winter. Grain yields are little affected by fall grazing if adequate nutrients are available.

Management of spring growth. Spring grazing can seriously reduce grain unless careful management is practiced. Remove cattle before the tiny wheat heads inside the shoots are 2 inches above the soil surface. The miniature head, when exposed by splitting the stem, is about 1/4 inch long and appears just above the node or joint. When livestock graze wheat after it begins to joint, grain yields are seriously reduced.

Spring grazing can be a very effective control for lodging. This practice may be especially helpful when a heavy carry-over of nitrogen from a previous crop is suspected.