



Sheep Fescue (*Festuca ovina*)

Plant Species

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Sheep fescue, probably a native of the Northern Hemisphere, is a drought-resistant bunchgrass, somewhat hardier than any of the other fine-leaved fescues. Like hard fescue, this species does not produce much usable forage, but provides excellent ground cover, and produces 5 to 7 tons per acre of root biomass in the upper 8 inches of the soil profile.

Description

Sheep fescue is a short, semierect bunchgrass that forms dense tufts with numerous, stiff, rather sharp, bluish-grey leaves. Its overall stature is very similar to hard fescue, but somewhat shorter. The panicle is narrow, sometimes almost spike-like, 2 to 3 inches long, with a four- to five-flowered spikelet. The seeds are tipped with 1/8- to 1/4-inch awns. The slightly unequal glumes persist after seed shatter. This species does hybridize with Idaho fescue and western fescue, resulting in somewhat larger plants. The seed head protrudes well above the basal leaves on a stiff, naked culm.

Adaptation

Sheep fescue is adapted to a wide range of soil conditions in areas of 12 inches or more annual precipitation. It is adapted to about the same climate as bluegrass, and can be grown in most northern, agricultural areas. It succeeds better than most grasses on sandy or gravelly soils. Sheep fescue tolerates shade and moderate acidity, making it best adapted to forests and foothills of the intermountain region. This species is best adapted for critical area stabilization, e.g., road cuts and fills, pipelines, forest clearcuts and turf.

Limitations

Sheep fescue will not tolerate "wet feet" or saline-alkaline soils. Although this grass has excellent seedling vigor, it is slow to develop. The fine leaves of the seedling are unable to emerge through much of a crust on the soil surface.

Use for Hay

The short, dense, tufted leaves are difficult to mow. Total forage production is well below that of most other forage grasses. Under both irrigated and nonirrigated conditions, there are more productive grasses available. It is an excellent understory plant in mixtures with alfalfa on highly-erodible soils. Very little of the top growth gets into the hay, but root production aids both soil stability and structure.

Use for Pasture

Sheep fescue can be used with the wheatgrasses in alternate-row seedings in areas of low rainfall. This species is grazed well in early spring by all classes of livestock, and utilized year around by wildlife.

Seed Production

Seed production of sheep fescue is somewhat lower than that of hard fescue. Average yields of 300 to 400 pounds per acre can be harvested either by direct combining, or by swathing and combining from the windrows. The seed readily shatters when mature. The flow and handling of the seed will benefit from light hammermilling or debearding. If properly stored, viability will remain high for up to 10 years.

* The Montana Interagency Plant Materials Handbook (EB69) is no longer in print, but is available for viewing in Montana County Extension Service and National Resource Conservation Service Offices.