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Sowing options for early livestock feed and grain or hay later

Farmers keen to capitalise on subsoil moisture left over from summer rain may be tempted to scratch in some crop on the first available autumn rain. But what options are available when sowing in late March and early April?

It depends a bit on where you farm and what your objectives are as AgVivo Agronomist and Grain and Graze 3's Phil Barrett-Lennard explains.

“If grain yield is the sole focus, then no matter where in WA you farm, it will almost always pay to delay the seeding of cereals until a more typical sowing date of mid-late April onwards,” says Phil Barrett-Lennard. “This is because the “spring” type cereals we grow in WA tend to “run up” prematurely when they germinate during the warm and long days of late March and early April, decreasing their yield potential because of insufficient biomass at flowering and increasing their susceptibility to frost and disease.”

Canola is a little bit different. There are a small number of later flowering 6 and 7 series Spring canola varieties that can be sown in late March and early April with great success. And an increasing number of growers in the LRZ and MRZ are sowing 4 and 5 series spring canola varieties in early April. These will flower in winter, with a heightened risk of frost damage in susceptible areas, but will avoid a lot of late season heat and drought season in a tough finish.

If you have livestock in your system, however, you might be tempted to try something different on a few paddocks to produce some early feed for livestock, with the possibility of achieving a reasonable grain or hay crop later on in the year.

In the eastern wheatbelt, the most obvious choice is canola on its own or canola mixed with oats. At a Grain and Graze 3 trial in Merredin last year run by ConsultAg, canola sown in early April yielded as well as canola sown in late April. Grazing the early sown canola in May delayed its flowering to reduce the risk of frost damage, but did not significantly reduce grain yield. Extending the grazing into June delayed flowering even more but did sacrifice some grain yield.

Geoff Fosbery from ConsultAg is keen on the canola and oat mix in paddocks planned to be stock feed, as this provides a number of opportunities later on in addition to early feed for stock. Depending on the weed spectrum, the oats can be sprayed out mid-winter to leave a canola crop, or vice versa, the canola can be removed to leave an oat crop (for export hay or grain). The two can also be left together and continuously grazed, made into hay or silage (for on-farm use) or harvested and separated at cleaning.

In the medium and high rainfall parts of the state, a rain event in March or April might tempt mixed farmers to sow low density pasture paddocks to a mix of cereals (typically oats or barley) and an annual legume pasture such as clover, serradella or biserrula. The addition of the cereal increases early feed supply while the legume gets established. The biggest risk of sowing this type of mix in March or early April is a false break and the legume dies. But like everything in life, this is a risk:reward scenario, so if a follow up rain is received the pasture gets off to a flying start when the soil is warm.

In the high rainfall parts of the Great Southern and South Coast, “winter” type canola and cereals can be sown in March and April with no risk of them flowering too early due to their vernalisation (cold) requirement. From a livestock perspective this is very useful as they emerge when soils are warm and can produce a lot of feed in late Autumn and early Winter. The downside is that there are very few winter varieties that are highly adapted to our conditions. Winter varieties that a small number of WA growers persist with include Currawong, Wedgetail and Revenue Wheat and Urambie Barley. Of these, Currawong is the most adapted wheat, but unfortunately it’s classified as FEED. Urambie barley is well adapted to WA conditions, but again it is a FEED variety and prone to head loss.

Similar to winter cereals, winter Canola is an option when sowing in March and April. It does however have a need for more vernalisation than winter cereals, and this significantly restricts its suitability for WA. For example, even though Esperance often has early sowing opportunities, the winter temperatures are not cold enough to meet the vernalisation needs of the winter canola. The lack of vernalisation delays flowering so much that late spring heat and drought destroy yield potential. In a much colder environment such as Kojonup, the vernalisation requirements of the winter canola will be met and it will flower on time, although this will still be later than a traditional spring type canola. Early sowing is a must as the growth of winter canola in the middle of winter is poor.

After mid-late April, the standard spring cereal and canola varieties become available. A number of WA farmers have had great success sowing slightly longer season barleys (e.g. Scope, Oxford) in late April or early May with the intention of grazing these crops in June. Livestock have performed exceptionally well (e.g. pregnant ewes gaining 0.5 of a condition score) and the crops have gone on to yield well because the crops were grazed early.

More information can be found in the 2015 Grain and Graze 3 Trial Results Booklet at www.grainandgraze3.com.au.

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MEDIA CONTACT:

Phil Barrett-Lennard Mobile: 0429 977 042

Danielle England Mobile: 0429 676 077