



DEMAND GROWING: Andy Stock says teff hay has gained popularity with his horse customers.

New uses found for historic grain

By ANN TONER

AN ancient Ethiopian grain crop, teff, is gaining some popularity as a heat-loving annual forage crop. Volunteer growth the following year isn't an issue in a continental climate because teff dies with the first fall freeze.

"It's beautiful stuff," says Beth Fisher of Beaver City, Neb., who is in the hay business with her husband, Treg. "Horses will walk right past alfalfa to get to it." It's a good hay for starting calves and dry cows, too, she says.

"One lady fed her mature horse teff hay and nothing else all winter, and the horse was as fat in the spring as if she'd grained him all winter," adds Joe Unruh, who has found a place for teff in his Hesston, Kan., haying operation.

Teff, the world's smallest-seeded cereal grain, has been a food staple in its native Ethiopia since at least 1000 B.C. Ethiopians pound the gluten-free seed into flour, ferment it for a few days and make their famous platter-size injera flatbread.

Tiffany is one of several strains of teff that have been selected in recent years and developed as a potential hay crop. When harvested in the boot stage, the hay is fine, soft, sweet-smelling and very palatable.

Tiny teff seeds are difficult to establish, so they need to be planted shallowly into a firm seedbed.

"It's hard to get the drill set right," says Scott Rice of Wilsonville, Neb. "But once it comes up, it comes up thick."

Once teff takes hold, it really grows — up to 3 or 4 feet — in conditions that can vary from water-logged to droughty. The plants have large crowns and lots of tillers on a shallow, massive fibrous root system, say agronomists at

Key Points

- Teff is a small-seeded annual grain from Ethiopia.
- Certain strains have found popularity as an annual hay crop.
- Teff can be challenging to establish and difficult to dry.

Producer's Choice Seed.

Dennis Fitzke, alfalfa product manager at Hoegemeyer Hybrids, says teff yields can vary from 4 to 5.5 tons per acre in multiple cuttings on better eastern Nebraska dryland fields with 30 to 50 pounds of nitrogen, or 7 to 8 tons with 75 to 100 pounds of nitrogen under irrigation.

"My advice is cut early and often," says Rice. "It seems to have more moisture in it than prairie grass. I dry it the full width of the swath. I have a 10-foot crimper. But a sickle bar would be even better — it's too much stuff!"

The Fishers say it's taken as long as a week to get their teff to dry. They use it as a transition crop between row crops and alfalfa. The first year they planted it, on a dryland ridge, they got 3 tons per acre in one cutting. In 2008, with more rain and more nitrogen, they got 5 tons per acre in three cuttings.

Andy Stock of Murdock, in southeast Nebraska, also grows teff. Customers have fed it to dry cows, calves and horses.

Stock doesn't recommend second-year teff, based on his experience with it. His best stand has come from seeding on lightly disked cornstalks.

"You want to cut it when you first see the head in the boot," he says. "It's fine-stemmed and fluffy. When you cut it, it's soft, like green velvet."

nage is less. The decision may hinge on whether you need palatability or tonnage.

Teff seed is much smaller than alfalfa seed, and needs to be planted only 1/8 inch deep. It needs an extra-firm seedbed when drilled, says Anderson. Some growers have had better luck broadcasting the seed and rolling or irrigating it afterward. Teff needs about a week of moist soil to establish itself.

Tips for teff

TEFF is much finer-stemmed and leafier than some of the more traditional forage choices, says Bruce Anderson, University of Nebraska Extension forage specialist. Teff may have more crude protein and total digestible nutrients than millet, forage sorghum and sudangrass, but its ton-

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