



A large, white, stylized letter 'S' on a black background.

Forages

Forages, traditionally, have referred to the leaves and stems of plants eaten for foraging animals. Mostly livestock, but sometimes visiting wild animals like deer. Forages also can include grasses and plants that are cut and dried to feed animals, you probably know them as hay. Which is not the same thing as straw (the left behind stems and leaves from harvested cereals and lentils used mostly for bedding but sometimes other cool things like building materials, erosion control and fuel).

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Forages can also be grazed in field, cut into silage and are an important part of livestock production and sustainable agriculture globally.

So back to forages - the plants that animals love to munch on. Some are flowering, and some are mostly grassy. Forages also can be grown as cover crops and for green manure (which is when the plants are incorporated back into the soil to add nutrients).

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Forage seeds tend to be smaller, and the plants growing more densely than broadacre crops. Some are annuals and others are perennials. They play an important role in the ecosystem by supporting soil health, preventing erosion, feeding beneficial insects like bees and they can help hold water in the soil.

For your experiment you have a packet of grass and wildflower seeds to plant. If you look at the instructions you'll see the seeds don't get planted deeply and need to have soil lightly covering them. Farmers who plant forages can use the settings on their planters to ensure the correct depth. Forages, especially when they are in the early stages, can be quite fragile. They need the right amount of light and moisture but once their roots and plants are stronger they can grow fast! And some, like buckwheat, can grow into large plants, while others will stay small.

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Sometimes immature plants are used as forages (like cereals or lentils) for grazing livestock. Forages can grow back and are the backbone rotational grazing as a sustainable land management practice.

When your seeds have started to grow take note of how different the plants are as they grow and mature. You can 'graze' part of the 'crop' by trimming off some of the plants, then make note of how they regrow.

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Growing forages can help maintain healthy ecosystems, and provide biodiversity to support wildlife. Take photos as your plants grow and try to decide which animals would love your forage patch the best.



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