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North American Millets Alliance

Not Enough Fertilizer this Year? Consider Millets

If fertilizer is scarce or unavailable for corn, what are planting options? Have you considered any of the millets?

Replacing corn with soybeans is the most logical choice, but buildup of cyst nematodes prohibits replanting soybeans on last year's soybean ground.

Land prices and cropland rent are too high to leave ground idle. Just as costly is fallow syndrome if the ground is kept bare. Cover crops are a better option than black fallow. It may be best to plant a species of millet for grain or forage.

Millets need fertilizer like any other crop. However, they are excellent nutrient scavengers, so application rates are only a fraction of that needed for corn. A general recommendation is that fifty pounds of nitrogen is removed per ton of forage. *

Pearl millet, a tall, high-protein leafy grass, can break the nematode cycle. Economically planted at two to ten pound per acre in rows or drilled in narrow rows, pearl millet can be cut multiple times for forage, grazed through first frost without fears of prussic acid, or could be left as a cover crop over the winter.

Corn Belt farmers should consider **Japanese millet** or **Chiwapa millet**, a variety of the closely related billion-dollar grass, for grain or forage. Chiwapa can take wet ground better than Japanese, although both are better in this regard than most other millets. Unlike pearl millet, which regrows after cutting, Japanese and Chiwapa should only be cut once. These crops could be harvested as a food grain, but finding processors may be a challenge, and the potential specialty market for the grains (typically under the name, barnyard millet) is limited.

Teff is an extremely small-seeded millet that can be harvested for grain, or used as an excellent, leafy forage crop. The U.S. market for teff as a food grain is increasing, but buyers are limited – much of teff grain production is grown under contract. At over a million seeds per pound, if harvesting teff for grain, best have holes plugged on your grain truck.

Don't want a four-to-five-foot forage crop like pearl millet? The shorter **brown top millet** and **foxtail millet** are excellent for wildlife, as cover crops, and make nutritious forage. Grains from either of these millets can be used as a food grain or potentially exported, but commercial-scale U.S. food processing is not available.

The best grain millet currently in North America, and the poorest forage millet, is **proso millet**. About a half-million acres of proso grain are harvested every year in the U.S. Food uses for proso grain in the U.S. and Canada, as well as exports, continue to expand, although most proso is currently used as wild bird food. Proso has a slightly higher feed value than corn in poultry rations, and it can be ground for cattle and hog feeds.

All millets can be used to produce ethanol, but proso is comparable to corn.

Fertilizer recommendations for proso grain are based on University of Nebraska soil test zero-to-eight-inch depth for all nutrients except nitrogen where a subsoil sample from 30 to 36 inches is recommended.

Fertilizer Recommendation for Proso Millet Grain**

Nitrogen		Phosphorus			Potassium	
Soil test	Apply N (lbs.)	Bray P-1 ppm	Banded lbs. P ₂ O ₅ /acre	Broadcast lbs. P ₂ O ₅ /acre	Soil test ppm K	Broadcast lbs. K ₂ O/ac
0-20	75	<10	30	60	0-39	120
21-35	55	10-15	20	40	40-74	80
36-50	35	15-20	10	20	75-124	40
51-65	20	>20	0	0	>125	0
66-80	10					
>80	0					

*Soil Fertility Management for Forage Crops: Maintenance, Nitrogen Management for Grasses, Penn State Extension, August 19, 2025.

**Fertilizing Proso Millet (NebGuide G1945), University of Nebraska, May 2009.

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