

Late summer good time to establish new stands for forage crops

Written by Jim Hoorman

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The following article was written primarily by Ed Lentz, Hancock County Extension Educator, and supplemented by Jim Hoorman, Putnam County Extension Educator.

Late summer can be an excellent time to establish new stands of forage crops. It is also a good time to plant seed in bare or thin spots in stands seeded this past spring. Forages planted in late summer tend to have fewer environmental stresses and less weed competition. Available days for proper seedbed preparation and planting are generally more abundant in late summer than spring. Weather is still a major factor in establishing forages in late summer; however, the following management guidelines should increase the chance for success:

— Lime and fertilizer should be applied prior to planting, according to a recent soil test. Alfalfa compared to other crops has a higher soil pH requirement and a higher critical soil test phosphorus and potash level.

— Select premium alfalfa varieties for stand longevity, high yields and good forage quality. Also, proper Rhizobium inoculum (specific for alfalfa) should be applied at planting for future nitrogen fixation.

— In a no-till situation, minimize competition from existing weeds by applying a burndown application of glyphosate before planting. After the alfalfa is up and growing, late summer and fall emerging winter annual broadleaf weeds should be controlled.

— For best results, plant alfalfa after wheat or oats to avoid herbicide carryover. Planting alfalfa after sweet corn, for example, is not a good practice because alfalfa is a broadleaf plant and sensitive to broadleaf herbicides. Try to avoid spray drift from adjoining fields.

— A mid- to late fall application of Butyrac, Pursuit or Raptor and Buctril are the primary herbicide options. Fall application is much more effective than spring for weed control. Pursuit and Raptor can control winter annual grasses in the fall but should not be used with a mixed alfalfa/grass planting. Consult the 2013 Ohio and Indiana Weed Control Guide and always read the specific product label for guidelines on timing and rates before applying any product.

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— No-till seedbeds conserve moisture and can be very successful provided weeds are controlled prior to seeding. Fields prepared by tillage should use caution to not over-till and use practices to insure a firm seedbed. The soil should be firm enough that your boot leaves a print no deeper than 1/2- inch (you can bounce a basketball on it). A cultipacker or cultimulcher is an excellent last-pass tillage tool.

— Plant the seed shallow (1/4- to 1/2-inch deep). Carefully check seeding depth, especially when using a no-till drill. Use a drill with press wheels for greatest success with summer seeding. Broadcasting seed on the surface without good soil coverage and without firm packing (poor seed-to-soil contact) and planting too deep (incorporating seed by using a disk) are often the cause of poor emergence and establishment.

— Plant new perennial forages as soon as possible in August. Seedlings require at least six to eight weeks of growth after emergence to have adequate vigor to survive the winter. Alfalfa should be planted in the next two weeks. Other perennial forage grasses can be planted within the next month. Planting later than these dates may work but there is more risk for establishment failure and the stand may have lower yield potential next year.

— Do not harvest a new perennial forage stand this fall, especially legumes. Perennial ryegrass and Italian ryegrass are exceptions: they should be mowed or harvested to 2 1/2- to 3-inch stubble in late November to improve winter survival. If a spring establishment fails, a late summer planting is an ideal time to reestablish forage seeding because the failed seeding did not have time to develop diseases or allelopathic effects that commonly occur in old stands. Farmers should be able to replant these fields with fewer problems since the soil is generally drier in the fall. Phytophthora, Phythium and other root diseases are more common in spring plantings than in late summer. The fastest and least risky alternative to get a nonproductive field back into production is to kill the existing forage, plant another small grain crop and then plant it back to a forage crop in late summer. This strategy minimizes problems with allelopathy and diseases (Mike Rankin, Wisconsin UWEX).

By following these guidelines and with a little cooperation from the weather, a farmer should have a vigorous and productive new forage stand next year that can yield the same as if it had been planted this past spring.