

Fall Seeding Grasses

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Late-summer and fall establishment of grass is often desired in the Midwest. Most farmers do not realize how fall seeding date affects the yield of the grasses the next year. Six forage grasses were seeded at several late summer dates at three sites in Wisconsin (River Falls, Arlington, and Lancaster) over 3 years. Seeding dates were spaced approximately every 2-3 weeks from August 1 to November 1. Species included orchardgrass, smooth brome grass, timothy, reed canarygrass, perennial ryegrass and tall fescue.

All of the grasses seeded by mid- to late-September produced stands with visible plants by killing frost most years and usually survived the winter. Later seedings did not produce visible plants until spring, if at all. Slow establishing species, particularly reed canarygrass, produced better stands when seeded by early September. Timothy tended to be the most variable with regard to seeding date and following year yield. In only one trial out of nine did a November seeding, where the seed lay dormant over winter, produce a stand the next spring.

The most important finding is that earlier seeding dates (early to mid-August) usually had more tillers/ft², more tillers/plant, and higher DM yield the following season. When harvested at boot stage, the average first cutting yields the spring after late summer seeding ranged from 1.5 ton/ac for some grasses to less than 0.5 ton/ac for others depending on when they were sown the previous fall (Figure 1). By later cuttings the stands had recovered and all yielded well. Delaying late summer seeding from mid-August to mid-September generally resulted in 1 ton/ac less yield the next year.

Delaying grass seeding in the late summer or early fall not only increases the risk of establishment failure but reduces yield of the stand the following year. Therefore, seeding grasses as early as possible during the month of August is recommended.

Figure 1. Effect of late summer seeding date on yield of grasses the next spring.

