

Alfalfa Best Practices: Four Easy Steps to Alfalfa Management

by BASF Corporation

The best alfalfa crop is a result of intensively managed acres, resulting in a high yielding and high quality crop, cut after cut. Growers who are ahead of the game, in terms of providing nutrients to the soil and controlling weeds, insects, and diseases, find themselves happy with their results. Best practices for alfalfa production, including an investment in intensive management and scouting, consistently pays off for growers.

SOIL FERTILITY

Before the seed is planted, successful growers ensure that soil nutrients are at optimum levels for maximum crop performance and yield. The alfalfa crop removes large quantities of calcium and potassium with each cutting, so these two nutrients—as well as soil pH—need to be optimized before planting.

WEED CONTROL

To protect alfalfa crops from yield-limiting weed competition, growers should apply a herbicide. There are a variety of products available to provide residual weed control or knock-down existing weeds in the crop.

Tailor your application to the weeds you expect. For best results apply a pre-emergence herbicide to provide residual control and, if needed, a post-emergence herbicide tank-mix before weeds reach 2" in height, thereby keeping the weeds at bay until the next cut.

INSECT PROTECTION

Alfalfa growers are accustomed to headaches caused by insects, especially alfalfa weevil and potato leafhopper, since they appear annually. Growers should proactively scout fields and seek local university information to catch these pests as early as possible. Since alfalfa weevil is typically the first insect outbreak of the year, scouting for these pests should start shortly after alfalfa breaks dormancy. When the alfalfa weevil reaches the threshold, an insecticide application will take care of the problem for growers.

As summer heat builds, potato leafhopper outbreaks are imminent. Again, growers who scout for these insects can catch them early and control the problem before it becomes detrimental. When potato leafhoppers are discovered, growers have two choices: cut or treat. If the alfalfa is ready, cut the crop and wait 3-7 days before applying an insecticide. This application will provide a residual to protect the crop until the next cut. If alfalfa is not ready for cutting when the potato leafhoppers reach thresholds, apply an insecticide to help control the infestation.

DISEASE PROTECTION

Growers who intensively manage their alfalfa acres scout their fields for disease and subsequently, spray a fungicide to stop the disease from spreading. This fungicide application in-turn keeps the plant healthier, potentially resulting in a higher quality crop at cutting. If a fungicide is sprayed at the onset of disease, the product will stop the disease in its tracks and help prevent fungal proliferation that may cause new infections. Ideally, begin scouting for disease after the crop reaches 6" in height and has canopied; this timing is the ideal environment for fungus growth.

CONCLUSION

Alfalfa growers have many options for weed, insect, and disease control throughout the life of their crop. By staying on top of problems throughout the growing season – and taking care of problems as soon as they arise – growers can expect to see a healthier, higher quality crop after each cut, resulting in more money in their pocket harvest after harvest.



Lambsquarter.



Chickweed.



Alfalfa weevil pinholes.



Potato Leafhopper damage.



Insect scouting.