

Making the Most of Your 2013 Alfalfa Crop

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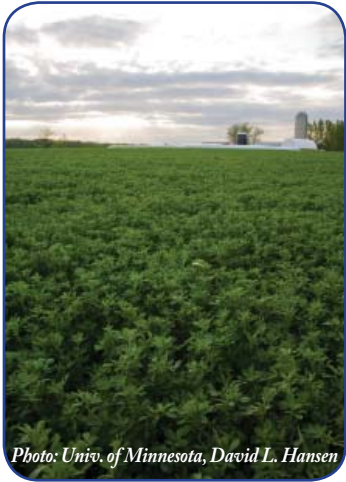


Photo: Univ. of Minnesota, David L. Hansen

Drought is likely weighing heavily on your mind as the growing season approaches. Dry conditions this past year have resulted in hay shortages and high costs across the Midwest. That makes following these key practices vital to supporting the development of a healthy and high-yielding crop this summer.

Stand Assessment

Evaluating your alfalfa stand is a crucial step in producing an optimal alfalfa crop. This is especially important during a year like this when you are likely planting more acres of alfalfa to make up for last year's losses. Stand assessment will help you determine the quality of your fields and whether it is best to keep, reseed, or rotate your current crop.

Well-packed soil is always an important factor in strong stand establishment. It is important to make sure soil is not too loose at the time of seeding. And, seeding too deep can result in stand failure, so be sure to determine the ideal levels of planting for each field and overall conditions.

Remember to always wait until the plant is growing to assess the stand, because you are looking for the development and growth of new shoots, along with assessing root health.

- Normal roots should be creamy white to tannish brown with very few scars or lesions.
- Moderate to slight damage is harder to assess but is usually manifested by slight discoloration (yellowing), a corky feel, and very slow or no re-growth occurring after the soil has warmed up.
- Severely damaged roots will be discolored and possibly have a water soaked or mushy feel to the crown region.

When establishing a count, plants that show uneven growth but have several growing stems can be counted as they have a good chance of surviving and being productive. As stands get older, fewer plants are required for good production. Older stands often have more highly developed crowns with more stems per crown.

Weed Management

Once you have established the health of your crop, if you have glyphosate-tolerant alfalfa, it is important to apply glyphosate, as early as possible to help eliminate weeds before they feed off of your crop's nutrients.

Additionally, glyphosate can be applied to glyphosate-tolerant alfalfa at any stage of growth from pre-plant to five days before cutting. However, according to a study conducted by the Panhandle Research and Extension Center, if weeds were removed using glyphosate shortly after alfalfa emergence and again several weeks later after flushes of weeds had emerged, the alfalfa plant could be protected from weed interference, and stand establishment could be further enhanced.

Pest Protection

Even if you do everything to make sure you have a healthy crop growing in your fields this summer, pests can destroy months of hard work and investment if you are not prepared for them. One of the first summer pests to show up in the Midwest is typically alfalfa weevil.

Weevil adults feed on plants, but the larvae are what usually cause the majority of damage. Alfalfa weevils develop based on temperature, or accumulating degree days, making it easier to assess when the pests will be most active. It is important to use this benchmark to scout for larvae early and often. To initially detect alfalfa weevil larvae in the spring, use a sweep net to sample and calculate the larvae per square foot. It is recommended to begin scouting when 300 growing degree units have accumulated in your area. Visit the following website to track GDU's for alfalfa weevil:

Stage of Development	Degree Days Required to Complete Indicated Life Stage	Accumulated Degree Days
Egg	300	300
1st Instar	71	371
2nd Instar	67	438
3rd Instar	66	504
4th Instar	91	595
Pupa	219	814

http://www.soils.wisc.edu/uwex_agwx/thermal_models/alfalfa.

If you see grey shading to your alfalfa crop, weevil damage has likely already been done so we encourage proactive scouting. Talk with your local agronomist or seed dealer to discuss growing degree days in your area and your crop's economic threshold of alfalfa weevil.

It takes time to establish the most effective management practice for your alfalfa crop, but a bit of luck and these general tips will put you on the right track for summer 2013.

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