

Late-Summer Alfalfa Seeding an Option for Producers

Producers can get a head start next season this summer with timely planting

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As summer begins to wind down, winter wheat and canning crop producers are considering late-summer and fall planting options. Due to the wet spring, however, producers are facing fewer possibilities for their fields. Late-summer seeded alfalfa may be an ideal solution if producers take advantage of timing, conditions, and the latest genetics.

Give New Seeding Time to Acclimate

Seeding alfalfa in late-summer requires different planting strategies than winter wheat, for example. In the Midwest, alfalfa should be planted in August and early-September, before September 10. "Alfalfa seedings need enough time to go through a process called contractile growth before freeze," says Randy Welch, national alfalfa agronomist, WinField. "That means the plant has to transition from being an annual to a perennial. If a producer does not allow enough time in the late-summer for that to happen, (generally 6-8 weeks of growth) the plant could remain an annual and will not survive the winter."

Late-summer seeding helps prepare alfalfa for greater production the first full season, Welch notes. Winter and early spring moisture helps add significant yield potential in the first crop year. Seeding in late-summer also allows time for the root system to mature appropriately to quickly send up stems and leaves next spring as the soil warms.

Manage Weed Control, Monitor Moisture

"The two most important factors producers need to account for when deciding to seed alfalfa are fall weed control and dry conditions," says Welch. Many fall annual weeds, including (seedling) dandelion, shepherd's purse, penny grass, and some biennial mustards, plus volunteer winter wheat can impede alfalfa's growth and productivity next spring if action isn't taken in the fall to establish control.

Since late-summer weather is often dry, Welch stresses the importance of planting depth, saying, "Producers should plant alfalfa seed at that magical three-eighths or even slightly deeper in late-summer seeding if good depth control equipment is being used. The spring seeding methods, with the seed surface applied on top of the soil, may be far less successful, especially when soil moisture is unpredictable in late-summer. Attention to seeding depth can make the difference between success and failure of your late-summer seeding experience."

Success is also dependent upon weather conditions around the time of planting. "We generally need one good rain in August to help get seed off to a great start," says Welch.

To help preserve soil moisture, Welch recommends minimum tillage or even no-till. No-till drills can offer producers ideal seed-to-soil contact and optimum depth control.

Take Advantage of New Traits

Though there is the possibility of weed pressure and dry weather in late-summer, producers now have new tools to help combat those obstacles. Welch recommends producers look to Roundup Ready® alfalfa.

Roundup Ready alfalfa can help control weeds with no crop injury. This is particularly important as conventional herbicide treatments are not recommended in fall because of the risk of crop stunting or injury. Since these new traits help manage weeds, they also preserve water for the alfalfa stand instead of feeding water to the weed patch.

Late-summer seeded alfalfa offers an opportunity to establish a new stand for a healthy, high-yielding crop in 2014. Producers need to mind planting dates and conditions to ensure a successful seeding, but those who take the opportunity to plant in August, and utilize new tools, can look forward to productive stands for years to come.