

Pastures & alfalfa need attention now

NEWARK, Del. — Now's the time to upgrade fertility on alfalfa and pastures, says University of Delaware extension agent Dean Belt. "Some of you may have missed doing this last fall," he says. "Hopefully a soil test is available to indicate exact needs. If not, get this done as soon as the ground thaws enough to take samples. Soil tests are the only way to know where you stand on pH, potassium and phosphorus."

Belt offers some suggestions to help growers upgrade both crops.

ALFALFA — The age and condition of the stand will determine how much lime and fertilizer it needs. Generally, says the agent, a fall application of P and K is most desirable, as this helps strengthen the stand and increases winter hardiness.

But if the application is missed, by all means apply what's needed this spring. "Lime should go on any time the ground in the field is firm," he says. "P and K can go on before or after the first cutting — again, when the ground is firm. We strongly urge you to apply lime

and fertilizer as determined by a soil test."

Alfalfa needs a pH maintained in the area of 6.5. A 6-ton yield removes about 75 pounds of phosphorus, 360 pounds of potash, plus a quantity of boron. Belt says the P, K and B can go on either in the spring, the fall, or in split applications, half after the first cutting and half after the last cutting.

"The split application is probably the most efficient use of the nutrients, but has not proved to be the most economical. So push the pencil to figure out your cost," he advises. If you apply all the fertilizer at one time, a fall application is preferable. The soil won't be seriously compacted then, and the plants will be more winter hardy.

If weeds have been a problem and you didn't treat for them last fall, there's still time. But don't wait for the white tint of shepherd's-purse or the bright yellow of mustards and rockets to do so, Belt says. "You must apply herbicides at the proper time and

for the specific weeds present, so it's important to know just what's out there. Not all weeds are controlled by the same herbicide. Your county agent and farm supply representative can help you with identification and chemical selection. If you have a mixed alfalfa/timothy stand, the choice is more limited."

PASTURE CARE — Lime and fertilizer needs should be determined by a soil test. As with alfalfa, phosphorus and potash are most valuable applied in the fall, but there's still time for a spring application if needed. Nitrogen is the most important nutrient for getting grasses going in the spring, Belt says. The amount needed will depend on the type of pasture and the percent of legumes present.

Four tons of grass dry matter contain 150 to 200 pounds of N, so for a 4-ton yield consider applying 75 pounds in late spring and another 75 to 100 pounds after upgrazed seed heads are clipped in late May. If the pasture contains 50 percent clover or more, no nitrogen is needed.

Spring is the perfect time to reseed a weak pasture, Belt says, but do it early. Late February and early March is the time to interseed alfalfa and clovers. Many farmers broadcast clover seed over a pasture then, and let the freezing-thawing action of the soil work the seed in.

Grass seed can also be broadcast in March, but it's best to do this with a no-till drill. If one isn't available, a regular drill will do a fair job, followed by a cultipacker or roller to get the necessary seed-soil contact for proper germination. In some situations Belt says it may be desirable to lightly disk or drag the field before seeding to loosen the surface and improve chances for soil-seed contact. The seed must come into firm contact with the soil for the planting to succeed.

"If you really want to get the most from your pasture, weed control should be one of your management practices," the agent says. "This should go hand in hand with a rotational grazing. A thick,

well fertilized pasture will have fewer weeds than a thin, overgrazed one."

Droppings still need to be spread, however, and the pasture should be clipped often enough to keep weeds from developing seeds. If herbicides are necessary, several are available, depending on the weeds present, the crop rotation being used, and the kind of livestock being grazed. Again, consult with your county extension agent or farm dealer. Before using any herbicide in any situation — **READ THE LABEL!**



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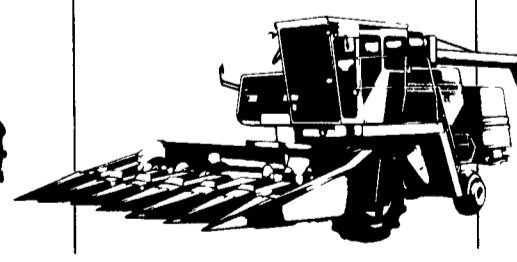
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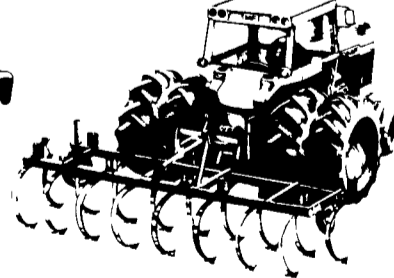
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