

Use resistant variety to battle alfalfa disease

DE KALB, II — Combatting diseases in alfalfa is a battle best won when the first blow is struck — by planting disease-resistant varieties. Producers should determine their major disease

problems, then plant a variety offering the best resistance.

Clifton Parker, regional agronomist for DeKalb-Pfizer Genetics, says alfalfa producers are facing increased disease

pressures each year. He says the following diseases are worthy of note:

Bacterial wilt: This is the most common alfalfa disease found in the United States. Bacterial wilt

plugs the water transporting vessels of an alfalfa plant, slowly weakening it over a two- to three-year period, until the crop is choked out. Producers can easily identify bacterial wilt, since it produces yellowish leaf tissue, and normally healthy plant leaves shrink and become cup-shaped. Plants with bacterial wilt also display a discoloration of the root system.

Phytophthora root rot: Common especially in low lying fields and in poorly drained, heavy soils.

The disease gains a foothold when plants are submerged by excessive moisture for two or three days. Parker says the root system begins to discolor rapidly, turning from light brown to orange. Damage is swift, he says, since 70 to 80 percent of a crop can be killed in just two to three weeks following flooding.

Anthracnose: Severe in the Mid-Atlantic region, anthracnose quickly is spreading to the Midwest. Its spores are carried by winds, then deposited in the soils. During heavy rains, splashing pushes the diseases onto the stems of the alfalfa plants, forming elongated, diamond-shaped lesions. Usually found during hot,

moist weather, loss can amount to 20 to 30 percent in less than one month.

Verticillium wilt: Identified in the United States in 1976, Verticillium wilt is considered the most destructive disease in northern Europe. It has been identified in most northern alfalfa-producing states, Parker says. Spores are carried by winds or farm machinery. Symptoms include curling leaves with yellow or pinkish discoloration that turn brown, die and drop from the plant leaving green erect stems.

Crop rotation is one method of controlling certain alfalfa diseases, Parker says. Effective chemical controls are not available at this point.

Parker emphasizes the only sure way to control diseases is through the selection of a disease-resistant alfalfa varieties, such as DK120, DK135 or Advantage from DeKalb-Pfizer Genetics.

Parker says other factors important to proper variety selection include winterhardness, longevity, fast start, performance under wet and dry growing conditions, regrowth and crude protein levels.

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