

Foraging Around



By Dr. John E. Baylor
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Early harvest-better quality feed

It's alfalfa harvest time again. And once again I repeat, "stage of maturity at time of first harvest is the most important single factor affecting forage quality."

So getting that first cutting off at the right stage of growth is important - not only because of the quality associated with early cutting, but because your cutting schedule for first harvest also determines your cutting schedule for the rest of the year.

When should that first cutting be made? For alfalfa, not later than full bud to very early bloom, most experts agree. Taking that first cutting at the full bud stage does not reduce the total seasonal yield because it usually permits an additional cutting before frost. Nor does early cutting result in stand loss provided successive cuttings are allowed to reach at least an early bloom stage of maturity and a good fertility program is followed. In general by the time an alfalfa plant reaches that early bloom stage its root reserves have been pretty well replenished. After cutting, the new growth will be supplied from those stored reserves.

If cool, moist cloudy weather conditions prevail, you may be hard pressed to find blossoms. Under those conditions check the new shoots at the crown. If these shoots begin to elongate, take that first crop off - even if the blossoms are not visible.

There are some exceptions to the

above rule. If your alfalfa plants have been winter damaged, or heaving has been a problem, and you hope to keep the stand another year, hold off on that first harvest until early or mid bloom. Quality will definitely be down, but delaying first cutting under these conditions will assure a higher level of food reserves in the roots and crowns.

And taking the first cutting off at full bud does not apply to seedlings made this spring. These new seedlings should not be harvested until plants have come to at least one-half bloom to insure adequate storage of root reserves in the young plants.

Hay or Hay Crop Silage?

All of the above may seem academic, however, if the weatherman doesn't cooperate and if you are in strictly a hay program. But if you have the choice of storing that first crop as hay crop silage, that's probably the way to go.

At least that's the experience of top producers over the past several years in Pennsylvania's Alfalfa Growers' Program. In fact of the top 50 growers over the past five years some 19 stored all of their cuttings in the form of hay crop silage and 47 stored at least one cutting in the hay crop silage form. Only three top producers out of 50 were in an all hay program.

June is the ideal month for growing alfalfa, and it should be your second crop that's growing!

Days are long, moisture is usually ideal for growth, hopefully there's plenty of sunlight, and both daytime temperatures (60-77° F) and nighttime temperatures (50-68° F) are near optimum for alfalfa dry matter accumulation.

Good Schedule

But one thing is certain - to take advantage of those ideal conditions for second growth you must get that first crop cut and off the field as soon as possible after it's ready to harvest! And that's why more and more of our top alfalfa growers are going the silage route for that first crop!

Maintaining a good cutting schedule for the rest of the year is also a key factor for top yields of top quality forage without sacrificing stands. Again experiences of top alfalfa growers in the state, along with results of many research studies, indicate a cutting interval of 35-37 days between cuts 1 and 2, 38-40 days between cuts 2 and 3, and 42-45 days between cuts 3 and 4 would be nearly ideal. But fall management is another story and will be the subject of an article later this

summer.

Obviously other essential items in your alfalfa management package include the use of top producing, persistent varieties; a good insect control program,

especially leafhopper control, and a sound fertility program. Next month, I'd like to discuss with you the fertility relationships essential to keep your alfalfa in the high profit picture.

Woodlot program slated

UNIVERSITY PARK — A program entitled "Woodlot Management for Private Landowners" is scheduled for July 23-27 at Penn State. This program is designed for woodland owners with no formal training in forestry. Participants will become aware of opportunities for forest management and be assisted in establishing their management objectives. Lectures and field experiences will be used to introduce students to the basic principles of forest resource management.

A registration fee of \$60 will cover the cost of the program. Printed materials used in the course are included in the fee and become the property of the student. Registrations must be

made by July 6 and accompanied with a \$10 non-refundable deposit.

The course will be held at the Keller Conference Center on the Penn State, University Park Campus. Field activities will use the experimental forest and other facilities of the School of Forest Resources as well as State Forest Lands.

The Instructors are James R. Grace, Forest Resources Extension Specialist, James C. Finley, Forest Resources Extension Specialist, and Jack M. Payne, Wildlife Extension Specialist.

For more information, call the Berks County Extension and ask for a registration brochure. (378-1327).



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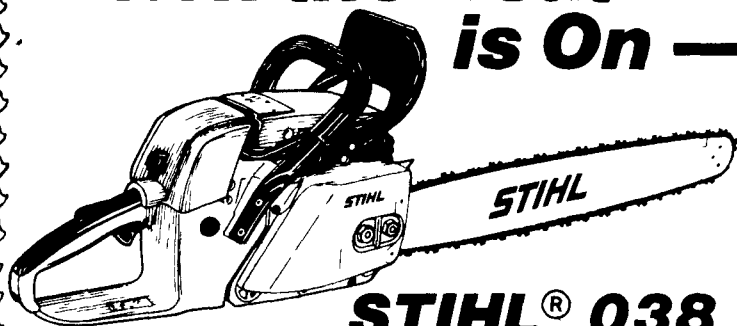
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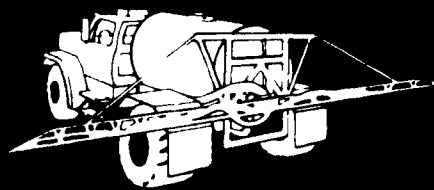
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