

## The special challenge of no-till alfalfa

TIPTON, Ind. — March 28, 1985 — No-till corn is a common planting practice; no-till soybeans are an increasingly regular sight, but no-till alfalfa presents special management problems that have kept it from becoming as popular. However, these problems can be handled with the right management approach—one that starts at seeding.

Alfalfa can be seeded as early as the ground can be worked, but double cropping behind a small grain in late summer may be the best alternative, according to Bill Fleet, an agronomist with the Eastern Division of Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.

"The seedbed is already in nice shape and it's generally dry enough so you don't run into problems with those early wet conditions. But more important than that, weed pressures just aren't there like they would be in the spring."

Weeds are the biggest headache in no-till alfalfa establishment, Fleet says. Understanding the strategy for spring weed control is the main stumbling block with springtime seedings.

"Because both broadleaf and grassy weeds can be a problem in spring, herbicides should go on at specific intervals," he notes.

The agronomist suggests spraying 2,4-D between four and six weeks prior to seeding alfalfa; coming back about two weeks later with an application of paraquat and then waiting for signs of new growth before another paraquat application. He adds, it is important to note that there are variations to this strategy and there are other chemicals that may be used.

"The problem is that farmers forget that there's a time lag involved and they either start too late or get in a hurry. The consequences are poor weed control," Fleet says.

Unlike spring-established stands, a late July over early August seeding can often be done with no herbicides or just one

application of paraquat. However, it is crucial to incorporate soil insecticides at planting to control insects, he adds.

Once the number of plants per square foot fall below five, the stand should be plowed under. Fleet cautions against attempting to thicken an existing stand by planting alfalfa seed into old alfalfa stands.

"There's no question that there is an autotoxic effect, but it's not a matter of the plant producing special chemicals that are only toxic to young alfalfa plants. They are natural compounds produced by the plant—it's just that they inhibit germination and seedling growth.

"Autotoxicity is not a phenomenon occurring only in alfalfa; the same situation exists in other crops. It just seems to be more pronounced in alfalfa and other legume crops such as clover," the Pioneer agronomist says.

Rather than following an old stand with alfalfa again, Fleet suggests using the nitrogen built up in the soil to reduce the amount needed for a corn crop the following year.

"But if it's a case where you absolutely have to put in alfalfa after alfalfa, say for erosion reasons, I recommend totally killing the old stand in the fall. Spray it with Roundup or a combination of 2,4-D and Banvel and let it sit. Go back and plow it, if possible, about two weeks later and then leave it alone until spring."

The stand can be re-established the following year, but Fleet stresses this is not a recommended practice.

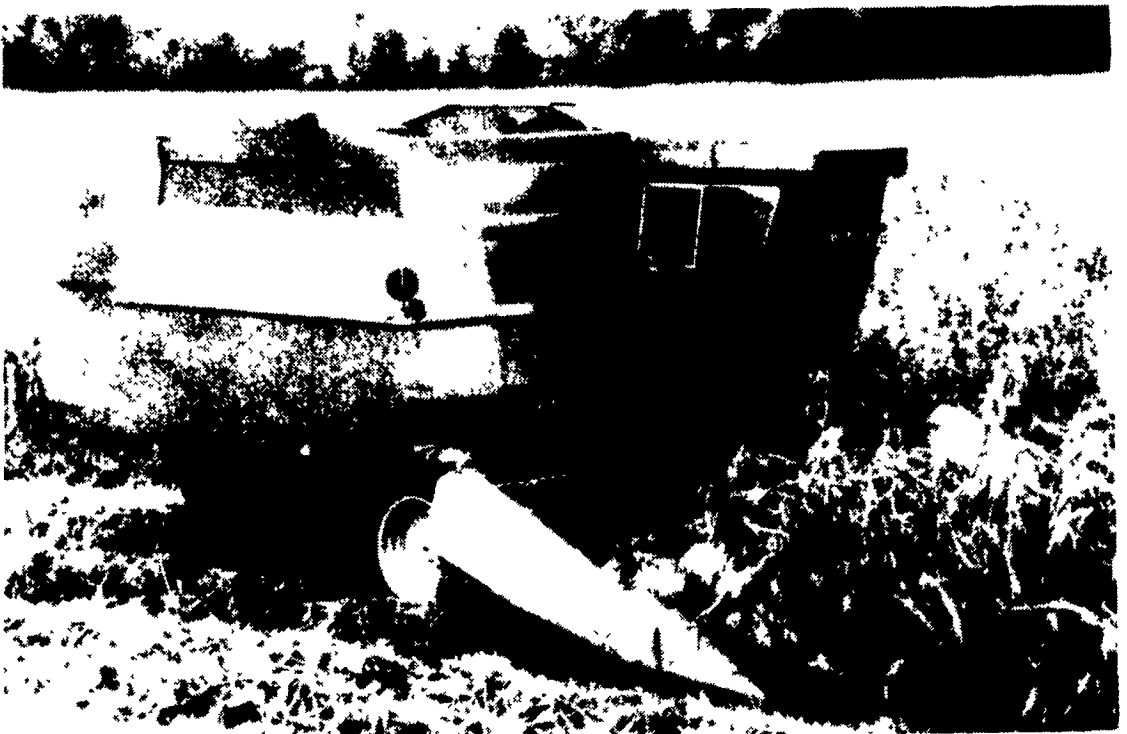
"In most cases, it is better to reap the benefits of the nitrogen from the legume for the corn crop and let it help you reduce expenses," he says.

The expenses involved in growing alfalfa are due primarily to high machine ownership and operational costs. No-till planting

is an excellent way to reduce these costs, but lack of attention to detail can be the downfall of a reduced tillage program.

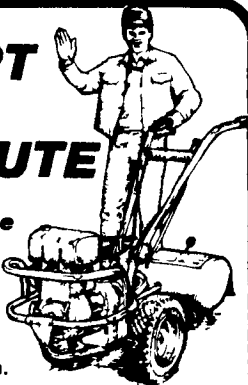
"You really have to commit yourself to excellence when you grow this crop no-till," Fleet concludes.

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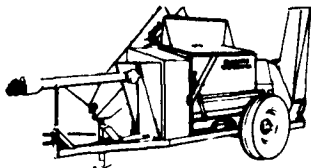
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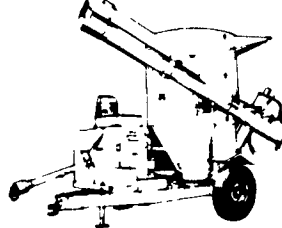


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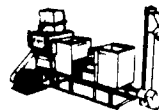
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