

# Best time to seed alfalfa

NEWARK, Del. — It will soon be time to put in alfalfa, for farmers who prefer fall seedings. It's important to be ready for this operation since alfalfa is an expensive crop to plant. "Some very important decisions must be made in order to give a fall seeding every possible chance to succeed," says University of Delaware extensions agricultural agent Dean Belt.

Factors to consider when planting alfalfa include site selection, soil fertility and pH, varietal selection, soil preparation and inoculants. Belt recommends the following procedures.

**Site Selection** — Select a field with deep, rich, well-drained soil that can hold water during drought conditions. "Alfalfa won't tolerate poor drainage," the agricultural agent warns. "So be choosy. Don't plant in a field just because it happens to be available. And don't plant where high rates of triazines have been used within the past year."

**Fertility** — Plan ahead for an alfalfa planting. This crop uses

high rates of calcium, phosphorus, potassium, boron and sulfur. It needs soils with a pH of 6.8 to 7.0. Start liming at least a year before the intended planting date. "A soil test is a must to know what you are starting with and what needs to be applied," Belt says. "If manure is available, use it."

Liquid manure can be used as a top dressing but don't put it on new seedings. On older stands that are thick and free of weeds only use liquid manure between cuttings — but never apply more than 5 tons per acre. The nitrogen in the manure will stimulate weedy stands and you'll lose your alfalfa.

**Varieties** — There are many excellent new varieties to add to the old ones. Select those that have done well in variety trials for several years. "Use a new variety only on a limited basis until it has proven itself over a few years of evaluation," Belt says. "Contact your local extension office for information on the results of recent variety trials."

**Soil Preparation** — Before

planting conventional alfalfa, the soil needs to be worked into a fine textured but firm condition. Alfalfa seed should be placed no more than ¼- to ½-inch deep. Loose or poorly worked soil allows seeds to fall through spaces, becoming too deep for proper germination. Using a cultipacker before and after seeding works well; or, for the ideal method, use a cultipacker seeder.

"If you're concerned about weeds, apply Eptam or Balan preplant incorporated 4 to 6 inches deep according to label instructions," the county agent advises. "These herbicides do a good job on grasses and some broadleaf weeds, so use them on pure alfalfa stands only. If broadleaf weeds become a problem, use 2,4-DB after alfalfa seedlings have at least two trifoliate leaves and weeds are no more than 3 inches tall."

Do consider no-till alfalfa, but only on fields where the pH is at the proper level, fertility is up and weeds are under control. Barley or

wheat stubble makes an excellent cover for a no-till seeding provided the ground is level and perennial weeds are under control. For details, refer to the University of Maryland publication, "Establishing No-till Alfalfa," available from county extension offices in Maryland and Delaware.

Inoculation is also very important for a successful stand of alfalfa. "Today many companies preinoculate the seed prior to bagging," Belt says. "We strongly suggest you inoculate the seed

anyway." Inoculants are small living organisms called rhizobia. They are easily killed by heat, so it's best to inoculate seed just before planting. Store inoculants in a refrigerator and observe the expiration date.

Based on the above requirements for a good stand, farmers who plan to establish some alfalfa this fall have much to do before then. "Getting off to a good start will greatly influence the quality and longevity of the stand," Belt concludes.

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