

## GRAZING PASTURE MANAGEMENT

**ALFALFA CUTTING MANAGEMENT**  
**Dr. Marvin H. Hall**  
 Penn State

Cutting management is an important tool in achieving high quality, high yields, and stand persistence. It also can be effective in reducing the impact of weed, insect, and disease pests.

Harvest schedules will depend somewhat on the quality goals of the producer. Progressive dairy farmers have recognized the economic importance of producing

high quality forage and will often cut early in order to obtain greater than 20 percent crude protein, less than 30 percent acid detergent fiber, and less than 40 percent neutral detergent fiber. Such high quality forage has the potential to increase forage dry matter intake and milk production while decreasing the requirement the requirement for grain.

For high quality alfalfa, make the first cutting at mid- to full bud stage, so long as:

- Better adapted varieties with

multiple pest resistance are used.

- Adequate levels of lime, phosphorus, and potassium are maintained.
- Insect pests are monitored and controlled.

Cutting pre or early bud alfalfa is not recommended because there is a higher risk of losing the stand. Also, fiber levels may be undesirably low when cut extremely early. If an alfalfa stand has been weakened by winter stress, make the first cutting at early to mid bloom stage.

Generally, summer cuttings are permitted to reach early bloom (approximately 35 days between cuttings). In Pennsylvania, the average cutting intervals between first and second cuts and second and third cuts, for producers who make four or more cuts per year, is 37 and 33 days, respectively.

In the past, it has been recommended that producers should avoid cutting alfalfa during the critical six-week period prior to the average hard frost date (generally between early September and mid-October). This should still be

considered if the stand is weak because of such factors as low soil fertility, disease, or extreme climatic conditions (such as water-saturated soils). However, it has more recently been recognized that alfalfa can be cut even during this critical period as long as:

- Better adapted varieties with multiple pest resistant are used.
- Adequate levels of lime, phosphorus, and potassium are maintained.
- There are at least 45 days of regrowth prior to cutting.

If harvests are delayed until mid-October, leave a 4- to 6-inch stubble to protect the crown and to catch snow for added insulation over winter unless the stand is to be plowed down the following spring.

Harvest schedules for alfalfa-grass mixtures should be based on the growth stage of the alfalfa as it relates to the species of grass used in the mix. Because orchardgrass, perennial ryegrass, reed canarygrass, and tall fescue can tolerate more frequent cuttings without jeopardizing the grass stand, they

are more compatible with frequently cut alfalfa.

Stands of timothy or smooth brome grass mixed with alfalfa should not be cut until the grass is in the early head-emergence stage, and cannot tolerate frequently cut alfalfa; therefore, they are more compatible with less intensely managed alfalfa (three cuts or less per year).

For information on alfalfa cutting management, refer to "Agronomy Facts 7: Cutting Management of Alfalfa, Red Clover, and Birdsfoot Trefoil," available from your county cooperative extension office.

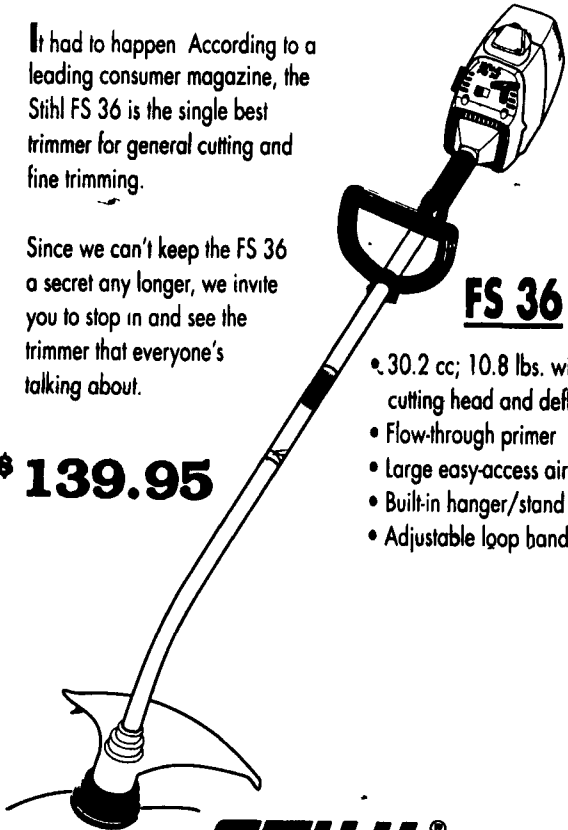


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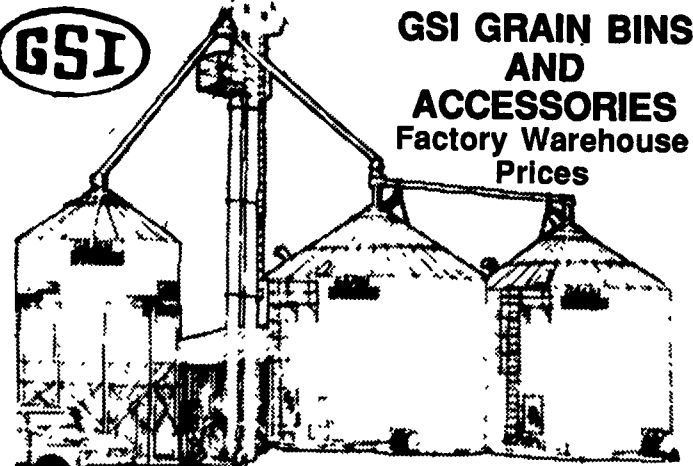
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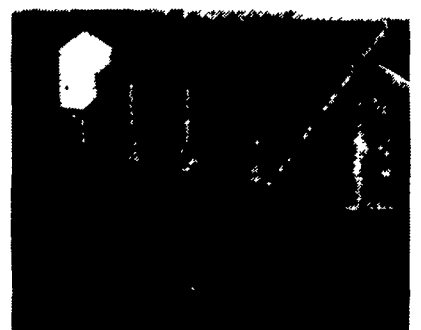
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