

# Alfalfa Trials Offer Farmers Unbiased Information

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Todd works closely with and under the direction of Scott Harkcom, agronomy research farm manager, and Dr. Marvin Hall, forage extension specialist.

"The purpose of the trials is to see how the varieties perform under different growing conditions," said Harkcom. "The yearly report is a real benefit to the seed industry and producers."

Both trial locations feature well-drained Hagerstown silt loam soils. With the Landisville location's slightly longer growing season and higher temperatures, Todd is able to harvest alfalfa five times per season compared to four cuttings at Rockspring. Testing at two sites allows variety evaluations that are

more applicable to various parts of Pennsylvania. Harkcom would like to eventually establish another test site in the state.

"Marvin Hall and I oversee the program. Dick makes the program go. He crunches the numbers and puts the report together. Because it's a yield trial, we manage the trials intensively for no weeds or insects," Harkcom said.

"Each variety is replicated four times in three-foot x 15-foot plots," Todd said. "Fertilizer is applied according to soil test recommendations. All alfalfa varieties are harvested on the same day. Cutting dates are based on maturity and proper cutting interval."

The alfalfa trials were first established at Rockspring in early 1980s. The first forage grass trials were planted in the late 1980s because of a growing interest in hay production and rotational grazing.

Also, some soils in Pennsylvania are not suited for alfalfa production. Forage grass trails are conducted only at Rockspring, but they hope to establish another forage grass trail at another location in the state.

"The orchardgrass, timothy, tall fescue, ryegrass, and reed canarygrass plots require more management on Dick's part because maturity varies per variety. They're harvested at different times so that forage yields are measured at comparable stages."

"The alfalfa and forage grass tests are only part of the variety-testing programs," Harkcom said. "We conduct similar evaluations for corn, small grains, and soybeans. Although these are primarily yield trials, we are conducting separate trials on those crops that have specialty traits, such as potato leafhopper resistance."

Farmers and alfalfa producers deciding which varieties would best suit their situation are invited to visit the test plots during Ag Progress Days. Although the test information is available between Thanksgiving and Christmas, the published "Forage Trials Report" becomes available by Christmas, and farmers are encouraged to pick up their copy at the Farm Show in Harrisburg.

The "Forage Trials Report" charts yield performance per variety for the current growing season, previous harvests, and average yields over the life of the stand. It includes precipitation statistics, leafhopper trials, red clover variety trials, and cool-season grass variety trials at both locations.



Alleys separate six variety test plots at the Penn State Alfalfa Variety Testing Program sites. This stand shows two weeks' regrowth. Senior Research Aide Dick Todd, left, discusses plot management with Scott Harkcom, manager of the Agronomy Research Farm.



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