

Tips for Fall Seeding of Alfalfa

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It's time to start getting ready to establish new stands of alfalfa this fall, according to K-State Research and Extension crop production specialist Jim Shroyer.

"Late summer and early fall are often the best times to plant alfalfa in Kansas, provided there has been enough rainfall," Shroyer said. "A fall-seeded crop is more productive during the first growing season than a spring-seeded crop. After the first season, however, yield potential is about the same."

Growers in northwest Kansas can plant as early as Aug. 10-15, he said. Those in southeast Kansas can plant in mid- to late September. In other parts of Kansas, planting time is late August or early September.

"Producers just need to plant early enough to have three to five trifoliolate leaves before the first frost. Alfalfa is a three- to five-year or longer investment. Some producers shy away from alfalfa because of its high establishment cost and risk of stand failure," the agronomist said.

"In the long run, however, it's relatively inexpensive, if amortized over the life of the crop," Shroyer added. "If managed properly and if we have a good year in terms of weather, dryland alfalfa can produce four to six tons of forage per acre per year. Irrigated fields can produce eight to 12 tons per acre per year."

When planting alfalfa, producers should keep the following in mind:

* Test the soil. Alfalfa grows best in well-drained soils with a pH of 6.5 to 7.5. Plants will not form the nodules needed for nitrogen fixation if the pH is too low. If the land needs lime, add it before planting. Apply the needed phosphorus and potassium. Each cutting removes 10-12 pounds of phosphorus per acre for each ton of forage harvested, so it's an annual input.

* Plant certified, inoculated seed. Inoculation helps alfalfa seedlings fix available soil nitrogen for optimum production.

* Plant in firm, moist soil. If possible, prepare the seedbed and plant after a rain. Tilling after a rain will reduce soil moisture. A firm seedbed ensures good seed-soil contact; therefore, use a press wheel with the drill to firm the soil over the planted seed. Or, consider no-till planting in small-grains stubble – which is a successful alternative and in some areas is the primary mode of planting.

* Don't plant too deeply. Plant one-fourth to one-half-inch deep on medium- and fine-textured soils and three-fourths-inch deep on sandy soils. Don't plant deeper than 10 times the seed diameter.

* Use the right seeding rate. Plant 12 to 15 pounds per acre of dryland in central and eastern Kansas.

* Check for herbicide carryover that could damage the new alfalfa crop – especially when planting alfalfa no-till into corn or grain sorghum stubble. In areas where row crops were drought-stressed and removed for silage, that set up a great seedbed for alfalfa, but may still bring a risk of herbicide damage.

* Choose pest-resistant varieties. Resistance to phytophthora root rot, bacterial wilt, fusarium wilt, verticillium wilt, anthracnose, the pea aphid, and the spotted alfalfa aphid is essential. Some varieties are resistant to even more diseases and insects.

More information about growing alfalfa in Kansas can be found in the annual performance bulletins and the "Alfalfa Production Handbook." That information also is available on the web at:

<http://www.ksre.ksu.edu/agronomy/extension/crops/alfalfa.htm>.