

ALFALFA – QUEEN OF FORAGE CROPS

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Over the last couple of years I have been getting a lot of questions about planting and growing alfalfa. The high quality and yield potential of alfalfa makes it a premier forage crop for many producers in our region. Many forage producers have not considered growing alfalfa over the last couple of decades, but based on the questions and comments I have received, that seems to be changing.

In order to successfully produce alfalfa, there are several things that are important.

Site selection. Alfalfa should be grown on a well-drained, deep soil. If the site is poorly drained, there is an increased risk of disease issues. The old saying is “alfalfa doesn’t like wet feet.” Make sure you choose the best soil on the farm as your planting locations.

Variety selection. Alfalfa stands can usually last 5-7 years, so it is important to choose a good variety that has the yield potential and characteristics needed for your farm. Producers can choose from conventional or Round-Up Ready varieties, as well as ones that have varying resistance to common diseases. One of the best things to do is investigate how various varieties yield in comparison to other varieties. When I want to see this type of data, one of the first places I look is The University of Kentucky variety testing trials (http://forages.ca.uky.edu/variety_trials). Our counterparts in Kentucky do a great job testing alfalfa varieties over several years.

Planting date. Alfalfa can be planted in both the spring and fall, but there are issues that need to be understood before choosing a time to seed. If you are going to no-till plant the alfalfa, it is recommended to only plant in the spring. Fall seeded alfalfa is susceptible to sclerotinia crown rot the first winter. Spring seeding allows the plants to get mature before their first winter, so the disease is not an issue. If you fall seed alfalfa, it can look good going into the winter, but in spring stands may have thinned out due to the crown rot. We strongly encourage producers to no-till alfalfa in spring. If you want to fall seed, conventionally plant the alfalfa as early in September as possible.

Soil fertility. Alfalfa requires a good pH (6.5) and adequate phosphate and potash levels. Since it is a legume, it doesn’t require nitrogen fertilizer. Be sure to soil test to determine the fertility status of your soil, and how much lime or fertilizer will be needed. Also, be sure to apply two pounds of Boron each year with your fertilizer.

Weed and insect control. Many people do not want to grow alfalfa because of the pest pressure faced in our area. Grass and broadleaf weeds are a constant problem, as is the alfalfa weevil in the spring. Most weeds and insect pests can be handled with timely pesticide applications. There are several options for herbicides and insecticides available for use, with the appropriate one depending on the specific situation.

Conclusion. Alfalfa can be grown in a pure stand, or with grass. Research in Tennessee and around that southeast has shown it can be grown with orchardgrass, tall fescue, and bermudagrass. It is a crop that takes slightly more management than some basic forage crops, but the high quality and high yields make it worth the risk.