



August is Prime Alfalfa Planting Time

MANHATTAN, Kan. – August in Kansas typically means hot summer days; back-to-school shopping; and, on some farms, alfalfa planting – if there's sufficient soil moisture, said Kansas State University agronomist Jim Shroyer.

"Late summer and early fall is the best time to plant alfalfa in Kansas when we get ample rainfall. The past few years have been kind of tough, though, not only because of moisture supplies but also because you had to worry about grasshoppers and fall armyworms," said Shroyer, who is a crop production specialist with K-State Research and Extension.

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, he said.

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

"We just need to have three to five trifoliolate leaves before the first frost," the agronomist said.

Alfalfa is a three- to five-year investment. Some producers shy away from it because of its high establishment cost and risk of stand failure. In the long run, however, it's a relatively inexpensive crop, Shroyer said.

"If managed properly, dryland alfalfa can produce four to six tons of forage per acre per year.

Irrigated fields can produce 10 to 12 tons per acre per year," he added.

He cautioned, however, that if there is not enough soil moisture at the optimal planting time, it might be best "to keep the seed in the bag."

Shroyer offered these tips when planting alfalfa:

* Take a soil test. Alfalfa grows best in well-drained soils with a pH of 6.5 to 7.5. If the land needs lime, add it before planting. Apply needed phosphorus and potassium. Since each cutting removes 10 pounds of phosphorus per acre for each ton of forage harvested, replace it every

year. Also apply 15 to 20 pounds of nitrogen per acre, before or during seeding. (Wet weather leaches residual nitrogen and hastens its loss into the atmosphere.)

* 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. In fact, in some areas it's the primary mode of planting, Shroyer said.

* Don't plant too deeply. Plant 1/4- to 1/2-inch deep on medium- and fine-textured soils and 3/4-inch deep on sandy soils. Don't plant deeper than 10 times the seed diameter.

* Use the right seed rate. Plant 8 to 12 pounds of seed per acre of dryland in western Kansas, 12 to 15 pounds per acre in medium- to fine-textured irrigated soils, 15 to 20 pounds per acre on sandy irrigated soils, and 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 milo stubble.

"In those areas where row crops were drought-stressed and removed for silage, that sets up a great seedbed for alfalfa," Shroyer said. "But if there's a risk of herbicide carryover, it could damage it."

- 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.

For more information about growing alfalfa in Kansas, producers can contact their local county Extension office and ask for performance bulletins and the "Alfalfa Production Handbook." That information also is available on the World Wide Web at: <<http://www.oznet.ksu.edu/agronomy/extension/crops/alfalfa.htm>>.