

Firm Seedbeds for Planting Grasses and Alfalfa

Pretty soon you are going to be ready to plant grass or alfalfa. You will hook up your seeder, fill it with seed, and start to plant. But first, let's check that seedbed.

In spring I like to remind you to check to see if your seedbed is firm before planting alfalfa or grass. Instead of just pulling into your field and planting, first get off your tractor and walk across the field. As you walk, look back at your footprints. Do you sink in more deeply than the soles of your shoes or boots? If so, your seedbed may be too soft. Another technique is to bring to the field a seedbed testing kit. Now, most folks also call this kit a basketball, but a basketball tests seedbeds better than any other tool I know. Try to dribble the basketball in your field. It should be easy to bounce that basketball on a firm seedbed. If you can't bounce the ball easily, don't plant yet. Firm that seedbed even more with a flat harrow, a roller, or maybe even irrigate.

Why so much effort for a seedbed? Well, when small seeds germinate their first roots must come into immediate contact with moisture and nutrients in the soil if those seedlings are to survive and grow rapidly. Loose seedbeds can have up to 50 percent dead airspace in the seeding zone. First roots that emerge into that dead airspace often do not live, and your stand will suffer. A firm seedbed reduces this dead airspace, which helps you get thicker stands that develop more rapidly.

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