

HOW EARLY CAN ALFALFA BE CUT?

First cutting often is the most important cutting of the year. It usually produces the most yield and its forage quality changes fastest from day to day. Alfalfa started growing like gangbusters this spring, is almost knee high in some places, and could be ready to cut soon.

Many growers cut soon after first blooms appear. But weather can cause long delays and sometimes alfalfa doesn't bloom very aggressively during spring. Plus, waiting until alfalfa begins to bloom often results in hay that is too low in quality for dairy use.

So what about cutting before plants bloom — or even before they form buds? Is this an alternative? And what are the risks?

Cutting healthy, vigorously growing alfalfa after it gets fifteen to twenty inches tall has several advantages. Weather might be better than later in spring. You begin the harvest sequence early rather than waiting until all the alfalfa is ready at once. Some insect and disease problems can be reduced by early harvest. Most importantly, feed value can be very high. Plus, second cutting probably will be ready before summer heat lowers forage quality on it.

Yes, yield will be lower from this early cut, although much of it will be made up in later harvests. Regrowth for second harvest also may be a bit slower than if alfalfa had been cut at a more advanced stage of growth, especially if your alfalfa experienced winter injury this year. And you must be sure to allow a longer than normal recovery after either the first or the second cutting if you want to maintain long-term stands.

Still, try early harvest on a field this year. You might like it.

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