



WEB CONTENT DISPLAY
April 6, 2012

EARLY ALFALFA FIRST CUTTING

It is looking like alfalfa could be blooming this year in April. What happens if your alfalfa is ready to cut in April? What should you do if it freezes? Forage specialist Bruce Anderson recently sent some tips on how alfalfa is responding to the unseasonably mild spring.

I took a look at the official weather data from the automated weather station near Plymouth in March. We had 15 days where the highs were 70 degrees or higher and 4 of those 15 days it reached 80 degrees or above. The average of all daily low temperatures throughout March was only 40 degrees and average of all the daily high temperatures was 69 degrees.

The March weather was fantastic this spring, something I cannot recall experiencing. Plants and trees have responded in our yards, but look at the alfalfa in the area. In many places it was a foot tall by the end of March and very leafy.

At current hay prices of \$100 per ton or more, it only takes 1 alfalfa weevil per stem or 50 aphids per stem (in the absence of noticeable lady bug activity) for the economic threshold to spray for the pest.

The plants are tall enough now only a narrow tired ground rig or airplane would be considered. Make sure and follow label instructions on harvest intervals on any field being sprayed and the pre-harvest interval would need to be less than 14 days.

If your alfalfa reaches its usual stage of growth for cutting, like early bloom, several weeks early, go ahead and harvest. The plants will regrow just as well as they have in previous years.

Easter of 2007 we saw a hard enough freeze it really messed up the alfalfa and certain winter wheat fields. Much of the alfalfa froze clear to the ground. Such a sudden deep freeze is very unusual and alfalfa reacted like it had just been cut for hay, but at way too early of growth stage. Regrowth occurred but it was slow due to the poor timing of the freeze.

If you get that hard of a freeze again this spring and alfalfa growth is enough to economically harvest, go do it immediately. Chances are, though, that it will go down before you get to harvest. In that case, just let it be. It will come back on its own, although slowly. Trying to hasten regrowth by shredding or chopping probably is a waste of time.

More likely is a frost that damages tops of plants but doesn't penetrate all the way to the ground. This is more difficult to handle. Plants will be confused, some continuing to grow, others creating new shoots from aboveground stems, and others with new shoots coming from the crown.

Cutting before a hard freeze will reduce nitrate risk because standing, frozen plants stop (or at least slow down) converting nitrate to plant N compounds (like protein) but still absorb nitrate from the soil for a little while. The most widely accepted delay to reduce nitrate risks with freezes



is 5 days. Nitrate toxicity from alfalfa is very rare. I would not delay harvest due to nitrate risk. Loss of leaves or collapsed, unharvestable plants soon after a freeze is a bigger risk. You can test hay for nitrates and adjust feeding if necessary but you can't recover lost leaves or collapsed plants. Finally, if the temperatures get down into the 20's, growers would be wise to cut it the morning after and test later.

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