

ACID SOILS JEOPARDIZE ALFALFA SEEDLINGS

Hello everyone. Believe it or not, it soon will be planting time again. Stick around to make your new alfalfa plantings more successful.

Do you plan to seed new alfalfa this spring? Will it go into ground that has been in row crops for many years? If so, it might be wise to get a “special” soil test before planting.

New fields of alfalfa often are planted where alfalfa has not been grown for many years. Seedlings usually emerge well, but sometimes they grow slowly and often look yellow.

The surface layer of many of these fields has an acid pH. This acid layer often is only a couple inches deep, but it can be severe enough to reduce the ability of alfalfa roots to absorb nutrients from the soil. More importantly, it can prevent nodules from forming on the alfalfa roots. Then seedlings are unable to produce their own nitrogen, thus becoming nitrogen deficient and unthrifty. Imagine that! Nitrogen deficient alfalfa.

You can avoid this problem. Before planting, gather two types of soil samples — one at a normal seven or eight inch depth and one only two inches deep. Then have the lab analyze the normal sample with the usual tests for phosphorus, potassium, pH, and so forth but just test the shallow sample for pH.

If the pH of the two-inch sample is below six point two, you need lime. But if the pH of the normal sample is above six point two and more than a half point higher than the shallow sample, you need only about half the usually recommended amount because your subsoil contains much less harmful acid.

What is the pH of your alfalfa ground? You don't know? Well, maybe you better find out and add lime if needed.

Dr. Bruce Anderson, Extension Forage Specialist
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
314 Keim Hall—East Campus
Lincoln NE 68583-0915
402-4742-2577
banderson1@unl.edu

