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## Hay's Tips on Hay

Are you planting some alfalfa this spring? Are you planning to use oats or another companion crop? Alfalfa often is seeded with a companion crop like oats to control weeds and erosion. In contrast, clear seeding alfalfa alone, without a companion crop also works well. A preplant herbicide like Balan or Treflan often is pre-plant incorporated to control weeds in a clear seeding, post products like Pursuit/Buctril or Poast can also be used. Which method is better?

Your own needs and objectives determine whether a companion crop or a clear seeding is better for you. I tend to prefer clear seeding because alfalfa production begins much sooner, with 2 to 4 tons possible the seeding year. Companion crops lower alfalfa yield the first year, and sometimes they cause thin stands. Also, yields and stands in following years almost always are better with clear seeding than when using a companion crop.

Have you noticed that I call oats a companion crop instead of a nurse crop? That's because companion crops like oats don't nurse. They act like weeds, robbing alfalfa seedlings of moisture, sunlight, and nutrients during the seeding year. But, on erosive ground a companion crop can be necessary or alfalfa may not start at all. So if you want alfalfa, plant only alfalfa. But, if erosion is a problem, include just half a bushel of oats with your alfalfa. Then kill oats early using Poast Plus or Select herbicide, or hay oats early rather than taking grain. Likewise, if you want oats, plant only oats. Then seed alfalfa into oat stubble next August if soil moisture is good. Your alfalfa will be better because of it.

Beef producers who cut alfalfa when time allows and are not overly concerned about quality should plant blends or branded varieties. This is seed of several varieties offered by the company blended together. This offers a moderate priced choice for producers. Alfalfa growers interested in producing top quality hay should plant the best pureline variety available.

Planting spring seeded alfalfa is recommended from April 1 to the 20th for our area. This avoids the coldest weather and the hottest weather, both of which can challenge new seedlings. Plant 10-12 pounds per acre in a firm seedbed. Using a drill with depth gauge wheels set to plant at 1/4 inch depth is preferred. Be sure alfalfa seed is inoculated with fresh bacteria for nitrogen fixation. Phosphorus applications based on soil tests will significantly increase yields. Application timing can vary, but after the removal of the first cutting is an excellent time for phosphorus applications.

Controlling grassy weeds with pre or post herbicides is helpful. Watch for potato leafhopper injury on young seedlings under the canopy of broadleaf weeds in late May of early June. This would appear as a yellowing or purpling of leaves. Leafhoppers migrating in from the south like the environment under the canopy. Mowing the field will almost always kill out the broadleaf weeds and reduce leafhopper populations below spraying thresholds.

Cut established fields beginning in mid-May and continuing every 30 days for best quality. New seeding stands should attain a height of one foot or have bloomed before cutting the first time.

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