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ADDING GRASS TO THINNING ALFALFA

Most alfalfa fields start to lose stand and production ability after cutting hay for several years. Sometimes winterkill thins stands. As your stands begin to get thin, consider interseeding grasses into this thinning alfalfa. Not only might you extend the useful life of your alfalfa field by several years, you also will develop excellent hay or grazing for your livestock.

The most common grasses interseeded into alfalfa are orchardgrass and smooth brome, but other grasses like endophyte-free tall fescue, meadow brome, festulolium, and wheatgrasses also can be used. If you plan to use this field as pasture, include other legumes like red clover for short-term pasture or birdsfoot trefoil if you plan to graze this as pasture more than three years. This will add diversity to your animals' diet and help assure good legume growth for several more years.

You must get these new seedlings off to an early start, so be sure to interseed as soon as soils thaw and conditions allow tractor and drills to operate properly. If your alfalfa still is relatively thick and vigorous, also take a very early hay cutting well before buds form, probably during the first week of May. This will allow sunlight to continue to reach new seedlings below the alfalfa. Then use your good judgement regarding competition from the existing alfalfa for subsequent hay cuts. By mid- to late summer you could be able to start to graze rotationally. The new seedlings won't contribute much forage this year, but next year they should be a welcome addition.

Interseeding grass into existing alfalfa takes timely planting and haying, but both land and livestock can improve with your efforts.

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