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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.

Orchardgrass is the grass most commonly interseeded into alfalfa, but other grasses like endophyte-free tall fescue, meadow brome, festulolium, and wheatgrasses also can be used. In fact, if the field will be used as pasture, a mixture of several grasses may be best since it adds diversity to your animals' diet.

Interseeding immediately after a mid-August to early September hay harvest can be excellent timing if you have moisture to start the new seedlings. Alfalfa regrows more slowly this time of year so it won't compete as aggressively with your new grasses. Still, if your alfalfa is relatively thick, you probably will need to take another cutting in about four weeks, or as soon as the alfalfa starts to form a full canopy. This allows sunlight to continue to reach new seedlings below the alfalfa.

Next spring you will need to judge how well established your new grasses have become. If they seem a little weak, cut hay real early to again open the canopy for better light penetration. After that you should be able to hay or rotationally graze as you choose.

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

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