

USING COMPANION CROPS WHEN PLANTING ALFALFA

Are you planting some alfalfa this spring? Using oats or another companion crop? Let's examine the advantages and disadvantages of your options.

Alfalfa often is seeded with a companion crop like oats to control weeds and erosion, and to provide a crop of grain or hay. Clear seeding alfalfa alone, without a companion crop, also works well. A preplant herbicide like trifluralin or Balan or Eptam often is sprayed and incorporated first to control weeds in a clear seeding, but herbicide isn't always necessary. So – 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 where erosion is unlikely because alfalfa production begins sooner, with 2 to 4 tons possible the seeding year. Companion crops reduce alfalfa yield the first year, and often they cause thinner stands. Also, yields and stands in following years almost always are better with a successful 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. However, 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 about half a bushel of oats with your alfalfa. Then kill oats early using Poast Plus or Select herbicide, or Roundup if your alfalfa is Roundup Ready. Next best is to 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.

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