

ALFALFA FOR HAY AND GRAZING IN TENNESSEE

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Alfalfa has truly had its "ups and downs" in terms of acreage in Tennessee for the last 30 years. Just as the effect of a good fertilizer-lime-soil testing program was increasing the alfalfa acreage, the alfalfa weevil appears and begins to destroy the crop. With the aid of the insecticide heptachlor sprayed on the fertilizer, farmers continued to fertilize the alfalfa and kill the weevil at the same time.

At this time Warren Thompson was pasture specialist in Kentucky and he had heard of the damage the weevil was doing to the alfalfa and he brought some Kentucky county agents to Tennessee to see this thing which had come to pass. After visiting the fields they went back to Kentucky to tell of the things which they had seen and heard as it was made known to them.

About 1965, heptachlor was pulled from the recommendations because of residues in the hay and milk, and the alfalfa weevils nearly starved to death. The alfalfa acreage was so small and the weevil population was so large and they were so hungry they moved over on red clover, white clover and all the burclovers which are alfalfa's cousins. For all practical purposes the burclovers are now almost extinct in Tennessee.

Alfalfa was "down" but not "out" because of a new insecticide "Furadan" which came onto the market about 1970. The state crop reporting service reported about 50,000 acres of alfalfa in Tennessee and many people thought they were very generous with that estimate.

Farmers started getting serious about controlling the weevil, and Furadan was the insecticide of choice. Its long residual was especially needed in Tennessee due to the long hatching season for the weevil eggs.

The entomologists found some parasitic wasps and Bob Mullett, our entomologist, released several colonies across the state. The alfalfa weevil population has decreased, but spraying is still needed in most cases for control.

No-till alfalfa was recommended for the first time in 1985. The slogan, "Get Ready for No-till" was promoted; also, the jingle "If your soil flows fast, better plant some grass." Planting alfalfa the no-till way has some drawbacks, but as soon as we learn to completely kill the existing vegetation, especially perennial weeds, the success rate will be much higher. We have lost Furadan granules for insect control in no-till alfalfa due to bird kill from exposed granules mainly in corn production. For

fall-seeded no-till alfalfa in sod or stubble, insects must be controlled to insure a good stand. Spraying the stubble after seeding with an insecticide may be the best method at present. For late winter and early spring no-till seedings, an insecticide may not be needed due to the low number of bugs living through the winter. (We like spring seedings in Tennessee - no crown rot "sclerotinia".)

No-till seeding of alfalfa provides an opportunity to almost eliminate soil erosion, to enhance water quality and to provide large amounts of high quality hay, silage and pasture. No-till is here to stay and will help provide a clean environment in which to live. "Let's get on with it."

Lime coated-pre-inoculated seed - we like it! Poor inoculation in new stands was a big problem before lime-coated pre-inoculated seed were available. Tennessee recommends the same rate of seed for both lime coated and noncoated seed, 15 pounds drilled, 20 pounds broadcast per acre.

Follow soil test recommendations for lime and fertilizer. Add some extra fertilizer if you are making high yields - 6 tons or more. Tennessee research shows the best time to fertilize is in the fall, next best winter, and next after first cutting. No big advantage for splitting the application. There is no bad time to fertilize. Make as few trips across your alfalfa field as possible, especially with heavy equipment when the soil is wet. The tires on these machines crush the alfalfa crowns and puddle wet soils.

For no-till alfalfa seedings, we have been pleasantly surprised with the results of putting lime on top of the ground on acid soils (pH 5.6 and above). Follow soil test recommendations. Finely-ground lime reacts with the soil quicker than coarse lime.

Pure alfalfa stands seem to last longer than those seeded with a mixture of grass. Drill 3 to 5 pounds of orchardgrass into old thinning alfalfa stands to increase yield, decrease weeds, and maintain a hay field a year or two longer. On steep, sloping land, where erosion is a problem, seeding a mixture of alfalfa and grass may be desirable. The seeding of alfalfa-grass mixtures usually eliminates the opportunity of using most of the herbicides for grass control at seeding or as postemergence treatments.

Alfalfa is used for hay, silage and grazing in Tennessee, but most of it is being planted for hay. Many of the dairy farmers are using the first cutting for wilted silage because it can be saved for silage with less rain damage than for hay. Also, with the advent of a new and different grazing alfalfa, "Alfagraze", there is considerable interest in planting Alfagraze primarily for grazing.

Alfalfa has been replaced to some extent in the dairy ration by the many by-product materials on the market, but the farmers who are still using corn silage and alfalfa (hay, silage and grazing) as their basic ration are maintaining high levels of milk production economically.

You have been fortunate here in Kentucky to have an excellent bunch of researchers, Extension specialist and agents to help farmers produce and use alfalfa. I've had the privilege of working with many of them for 35 years, and Tennessee farmers have profited by your sharing the research and Extension experiences. Keep up the good work!

Alfalfa is here to stay and the farmers who will manage the stands for high production of hay, silage and pasture will be rewarded for their efforts.

***PLANT ALFALFA, IT'S THE BEST
HIGHER QUALITY THAN ALL THE REST!***