Tips for planting spring forages

Cattle, goats, horses and sheep need forage as a feed source. Farmers often have pastures for these animals to graze during the warmer months.

In the winter, farmers have to provide hay or silage. Even grain-fed cattle need forage in their diet for a healthy digestive system.

Late March and April is a good time to seed forages. Forage crops often planted in our area include orchardgrass, tall fescue, alfalfa, and red clover. Pastures often have a mix of a grass and a legume, such as orchardgrass and red clover.

Alfalfa is primarily grown for hay and may be a pure stand or mixed with a grass.

Spring seedings can be a challenge. Farmers have a limited number of days when soils are fit for planting because of wet and cold conditions. Weed control may become more of a problem as planting is delayed into late April or early May. In addition, if planting is delayed until late April, the forage planting competes with corn and soybean planting.

Since farmers plan on having a forage stand for three to six years, care must be taken to plant it right, similar to the care a homeowner takes with a lawn. Dr. Mark Suci, Ohio State University forage extension specialist, recommends the following steps for a successful establishment of spring forages:

1. Make sure soil pH and fertility are in the recommended ranges. The Tri-state Soil Fertility Recommendations will provide the rate information at https://forages.osu.edu/forage-management/soil-fertility-forages. Forages are more productive where soil pH is above 6.0, but for alfalfa it should be 6.5 to 6.8.

2. If forage includes alfalfa, and soil pH is not at least 6.5, it would be best to apply lime now and delay planting alfalfa until late summer. An annual grass forage could be planted this spring to fill in the interim.

Soil test phosphorus levels should be at least 15 parts per million for grasses and 25 ppm for legumes. Soil test potassium levels should be 75 ppm plus 2.5 times the cation exchange capacity (CEC).

2. Plant high-quality seed of varieties recommended for our region. Avoid planting "common" seed (variety not stated). Seed labeled "common" usually proves to be a very poor investment, yielding less and having a shorter stand life because of poor disease resistance and/or winter hardiness.

3. Plant as soon as possible. Try to finish seeding by the first part of May. April plantings give forage seedlings the best opportunity to get a jump on weeds and to be established before summer heat stress. The smaller root system of a later-planted stand may not be able to survive hot and dry conditions of summer.

4. Prepare a good seedbed. The ideal seedbed is smooth, firm, and weed-free. Don't overwork the soil. Too much tillage depletes moisture and increases the risk of surface crusting. Firm the seedbed before seeding to ensure good seed-soil contact and to reduce the rate of drying in the seed zone. Cultivators and cultimulchers are excellent implements for firming the soil.

If residue cover is more than 35 percent, use a no-till drill. No-till seeding is an excellent choice where soil erosion is a hazard. No-till forage seedings are most successful on silt loam soils with good drainage and are more difficult on clay soils or poorly drained soils.

5. Plant seed shallow, one-quarter to one-half inch deep. Stop and check the actual depth of the seed in the field when you first start planting. This is especially important with no-till drills. Some seed on the surface usually indicates most of the seed is at the right depth.

6. When seeding into a tilled seedbed, drills with press wheels are the best choice. When seeding without press wheels or when broadcasting seed, culti-pack before and after dropping the seed, preferably in the same direction the seeder was driven.

7. In fields with little erosion hazard, direct seedings without a companion crop in the spring allows harvesting two or three crops of high-quality forage in the seeding year, particularly when seeding alfalfa and red clover.

8. For conventional seedings on erosion-prone fields, a small grain companion crop can reduce the erosion hazard and will also help compete with weeds. Companion crops usually increase total forage tonnage in the seeding year, but forage quality will be lower than direct-seeded legumes.

9. During the first six to eight weeks after seeding, scout the stand weekly for any developing weed or insect problems. Weed competition during the first six weeks is most damaging to a new stand. Potato leafhopper damage on legumes can be a problem in June.

10. The first harvest of a new hay seeding should be delayed until early flowering of legumes, unless weeds are an issue. For pure grass seedings, generally harvest 70 days after planting, unless weeds are bad, then the stand should be clipped earlier to prevent weed seed production.

Additional information on forages may be found in the Ohio Agronomy Guide, available at the Hancock County Extension Office.

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