Time to Plan for Fall Seeding

August is literally just around the corner; with the return of August and its foggy cooler mornings, many of our cool season crops can again be sown with higher germination rates. Back when we were operating the dairy, “A” stood for August and Alfalfa.

Our rotation of corn and alfalfa worked well because of basic botany. Corn is a monocot; alfalfa is a dicot. Besides the shape of the leaves and the directions the veins ran in those leaves, the difference meant that some highly effective weed control could take place without slowing the intended crop whatsoever.

For example, Johnsongrass in corn is a real headache. It robs nutrients and sunlight to detriment of the corn. Corn is a very expensive crop to grow. It took about $25,000 for us to put our crop out in the mid- 1990s. Diesel was 68 cents a gallon. Fertilizer and chemical controls were much cheaper. Some thirty years later, our crop would cost over $100,000 to plant in 2022. Needless to say, enemies of corn need to be controlled if not eliminated.

Johnsongrass is formidable foe. Cultivation can actually accelerate its growth. Most chemical controls that kill johnsongrass are hard on corn. Both are monocots. As close cousins, they live and die by many of the same rules. One thing johnsongrass cannot stand is constant mowing or grazing.

Consider this. As thick and messy as johnsongrass can be along roadways, when you come to a nicely kept lawn….zero johnsongrass. None. Why? Lawns are mown mostly weekly. Johnson grass can never get growing under those conditions.

While alfalfa isn’t mowed weekly, properly harvested alfalfa is cut between 4 and 5 times depending on weather in our area. That is double or more number the times a normal hayfield is mown and those few extra times are enough to help control johnsongrass.

Alfalfa isn’t without its nemeses either. Burdock, curly dock, chickweed and yellow rocket (aka wild mustard) can rob alfalfa of its precious nutrients as well. And as expensive as corn is to plant, alfalfa is 50-100% more expensive on a per acre basis.

Moving alfalfa ground back into corn not only took advantage of the deep tap roots of alfalfa as green tillage, it also left the broadleaf, dicot weeds that were hidden and protected in the alfalfa open to easy control with broadleaf herbicides that are relatively cheap.

So by now, we would have planned the fields we were moving to alfalfa and planted oats in those fields to burn off excess nitrogen and give us a good dry cow forage that didn’t steam the cows up too early. We would have cut those oats around July 4th, baled them up and stored them in the dry cow barn to prepare for winter. Our next step was to test and …. Wait.

We used late July and early August to pull soil samples to check our ground for acidity (pH). Normally we added about 2 tons of lime per acre. And again…we waited. We waited so we could see what kind of weed pressure would come up following the oat crop.

Oats are a monocot so oats, corn and johnsongrass all fall into similar levels of susceptibility to control measures in regards to weed pressures. With the oats and corn gone, the weeds had nowhere to hide and the slaughter was on.

We would allow the field one more rest and if we felt that a little clean up was needed in mid-August, we had time to do so and still get the alfalfa seed in the ground by early to mid-September. Once the Alfalfa was up and going, it thrived in the 50s and 60s of fall.

Of course, alfalfa isn’t the only cool season superstar on our block. Nearly all of our native grasses and lawns are cool season and they do well in the coolness the late summer and early fall brings.

If you are thinking about building up your farmland or overseeding your lawn, the time is coming to do it right. Plan accordingly and remember, it takes the same or less time to do something when it should be done than to put it off and try to force it into a time of your choosing.

Upcoming Events

August 1 Rich Valley Sheep and Goat Show Noon (Animals on the grounds by 11 AM)

August 2 Southwest VA 4-H Tractor Club Farm Toy Display Contest set-up, Community Building, Rich Valley Fairgrounds.

August 2-3 Inaugural SW VA 4-H Farm Toy Show

August 2 Rich Valley Dairy and Beef Cattle Show 4 and 6 PM

August 4 Tri State Beef Conference, Blountville, TN

If you are a person with a disability and desire assistance or accommodation, please notify Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at (276) 783-5175/TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.

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