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# THE FORAGER

Agronomics with livestock in mind!

## Successful Forage Crop Establishment

Because of high costs, seeding forage crops is considered "high stakes" in any farming operation. The days of spreading some seeds on the ground and hoping for nature to cooperate are past. Today, success is imperative. Producers must minimize risk as much as possible to ensure successful forage crop establishment. Consider these practices that can improve the success of forage crop seeding:

- **PLANNING AHEAD:** As with most other high-risk farming opportunities, it is important to plan ahead. Forward planning not only improves the chances of successful forage establishment, but also greatly reduces the amount of personal worrying after a forage crop has been seeded.
- **ONE YEAR BEFORE SEEDING:**
  - The producer needs to select which forage species or mixture will work best in their farming operation, climatic area and soil type(s). For example, alfalfa does not tolerate poorly drained or low pH soils, while red clover and reed canarygrass perform very well under these conditions. Although it often is difficult and expensive to change soil characteristics, forage species can be changed easily with little or no expense. Proper matching of forages to soil characteristics not only makes establishment easier, but also improves production over the life of the stand. Check out available forage species and their adaptability to conditions in your location.
  - Producers should not attempt to seed alfalfa back into an alfalfa field within one year from when the old alfalfa was killed. Established alfalfa plants produce a chemical that is toxic to alfalfa seedlings. Rotating out of alfalfa for a minimum of one year will allow the chemical to decompose. In addition, rotating to another crop will help reduce alfalfa diseases and insect pests.
  - A soil test should be completed and lime should be added to the soil to correct low pH conditions at least 6 months prior to seeding. Planning a year in advance gives producers several opportunities to apply any nutrient(s) that a soil test recommends.
  - Weed control in previous crops can significantly reduce weed infestations during forage seedling establishment. However, herbicide use during the year preceding a seeding should be monitored closely. Triazine herbicides that carry over in soil used for a previous corn crop will cause yellowing and can kill young legume seedlings. Therefore, producers should avoid using triazine herbicides in the last year of corn. If triazine is used in the year preceding forage seeding, application rates should be less than 1 lb/acre.
- **SIX MONTHS BEFORE SEEDING**
  - Producers should select varieties of the forage

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species they expect to plant. Desired seed products should be ordered early to insure availability. (Contact the Renaissance agronomy office for information about small grains, grasses and legumes.)

  - Six months prior to seeding is the last chance a producer has to adjust soil pH before planting! Most agricultural-grade limestone requires about 6 months from the time of application until it effectively changes the soil pH. Consequently, adding lime to raise the soil pH within less than 6 months of seeding will generally result in forages being seeded into soil with a pH lower than what is desired for best results. Applying the amount of fertilizer recommended by a soil test is also recommended in order to achieve optimum or high soil nutrient levels. Fertilizers may not be needed if fields have received manure applications during the previous crop. A soil test can accurately measure soil nutrient levels and prevent poor forage establishment as a result of improper soil fertility.
  - If crop rotation permits, the 6 months before seeding is the final opportunity for producers to control perennial weeds that will be difficult or impossible to control once the forage is seeded. Weed control costs are an investment that will be returned over the life of the forage stand.

We'll continue to review this important information in our next issue. Winter is an ideal time for producers to look and plan ahead – and make the most of their entire forage program.

*(Edited from an article by Dr. Marvin Hall, Pennsylvania State University)*