

Late Summer Seedings

By: Mike Hunter, Field Corps Specialist

This past spring may have messed up your grass and alfalfa seeding plans. The wet weather prevented some folks from getting their new seedings established in May. Some growers took the risk and planted them in mid to late June, while others have decided to wait to establish a late summer seeding. I would like to take this opportunity to review some of the management and details necessary for a successful summer seeding.

A late summer seeding can be a very good way to establish alfalfa, grasses or mixed legume/grass stands. Like most cropping issues, there are both advantages and risks associated with a summer seeding. Weeds and insect pressures are generally much less than when compared to spring seeding. Your workload may not be as heavy this time of year. Dry weather poses the greatest risk for a late summer seeding failure. Early frost and poor establishment techniques can also affect the success of the seeding.

In northern New York, summer seedings should be established by early to mid-August. Reed canarygrass and birdsfoot trefoil are two exceptions; they are slower to establish and should be seeded in late July. Later establishments could be damaged by an early frost. According to Dr. Jerry Cherney, Cornell University, a late summer seeding of reed canarygrass may be better than a spring seeding.

Weeds are usually less of a problem in summer seedings. Chemical weed control is not needed because the first frost will kill any of the annual weeds that come in. Perennial weeds, such as quackgrass, must be controlled before you plant the seeding. Any of the glyphosate products will take care of the quackgrass prior to establishment. Do not use any companion crop to try to choke out the weeds. A companion crop will compete for moisture with your forage seeding.

Lack of rainfall and inadequate soil moisture is one of the greatest risks associated with summer seedings. The decision to establish a summer seeding should be based on the current soil moisture and the extended short-term weather forecast. Don't take the gamble and plant in a bone dry seedbed. If it is too

dry and it does not look like Mother Nature is going to cooperate, keep the seed in the bag.

Summer seeding establishment principles are the same as spring seedings. Proper soil pH and adjusting starter fertilizer rates according to soil tests are necessary. A good seedbed and correct seed placement also contribute to a successful summer seeding. There is no need to adjust seeding rates at this time of year.

Soil tests take the guesswork out of your lime and fertilizer applications. If your soil needs a boost in pH, hopefully the lime was applied last fall. Alfalfa or alfalfa/grass mixes do not need any nitrogen in the starter fertilizer. Refer to the Cornell Guide for Integrated Crop Management or your current soil test for suggested phosphorus or potassium rates needed for establishment.

The next step in establishing a successful summer seeding is proper seedbed preparation. A very firm seedbed will not dry out as fast as a loose or lumpy seedbed. Test your seedbed by walking across the field. Pack the seedbed firm enough so that your footprints are hardly visible. You should sink in no more than 1/2 of an inch. A cultimulcher or cultipacker is a good tool to use just before planting. Depending on your seeding equipment, packing the soil after seeding may be needed.

The seed planting depth should be about 1/4" and no more than 1/2" deep. Don't assume that the seed is being planted properly. Get off the tractor and look to see how deep you are planting those tiny little seeds. If you are not seeing a few seeds on the surface, chances are you are planting too deep.

Harvesting the seeding this fall is not a recommended practice. Those tender, young plants do not have a strong root system yet. Don't harvest until next spring.

Late summer can be a good time to establish alfalfa, grasses and legume/grass mixtures. If you are interested in trying a summer seeding and have any further questions or comments, feel free to contact Mike Hunter at (315)788-8450 or Kitty O'Neil at (315)854-1218.