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CC205 Using Alfalfa for Pasture

W.J. Moline

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USING ALFALFA FOR PASTURE

Extension Service
University of Nebraska College of Agriculture and Home Economics
and U. S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating
E. F. Frolik, Dean       J. L. Adams, Director
Using Alfalfa for Pasture

W. J. Moline, Agricultural Extension Agronomist (Forage)

Alfalfa can be used to develop highly productive pastures in Nebraska. In addition, if not used for pasture, the alfalfa-grass can be cut for hay, haylage or green chop.

Planting alfalfa with grasses for a mixture of at least half grass and half alfalfa results in top production and less danger of bloat. But remember, for top production alfalfa pastures require good management and plenty of fertilizer.

Alfalfa-grass pastures do well on dry land in eastern Nebraska and are recommended for irrigated pasture over the entire state.

Plant an adapted alfalfa variety. Wilt susceptible and non-winter hardy varieties last but a few years. The best hay-producing varieties can be used for rotationally-grazed pasture. Check with your local county extension agent for the latest alfalfa variety performance yields and use only certified seed of a variety adapted to your area.

**Fertile Soil Required**

Alfalfa requires a fertile, well-drained soil. Start your program by taking a soil sample and sending it to the University of Nebraska for testing.¹ Use recommended fertilizers to boost your level of production. Alfalfa needs a generous supply of phosphorus and in most Nebraska soils, phosphorus is needed. If phosphorus fertilizer is needed on an established stand, plan to topdress your pasture. Applying phosphorus at planting time or with seedbed preparation eliminates topdressing for a few years following establishment.

Good seedbed preparation is one key to good alfalfa stands. On steep land, a cover seedbed is best. Spending extra time on seeding can assure you of alfalfa stands that will last many years.

**Must Control Weeds**

Use band seeding or other seeding methods that will place seed not more than ¾ inch below the surface. Good seed to soil contact is essential for getting good alfalfa stands. Both spring and late summer (mid-August) seedings can be used for establishing alfalfa-grass pastures.

Weed control is essential for spring alfalfa seedings. Most alfalfa seedings for pasture are made as alfalfa-grass mixtures. Because of the mixtures, few chemicals are suited for establishing alfalfa-grass pastures. However, chemical control of some broadleaf weeds in alfalfa is possible with the use of 2,4-DB. Check EC 67-130 (Chem-

¹ Soil Testing Lab, Keim Hall, University of Nebraska, College of Agriculture and Home Economics, Lincoln, Nebr., 68503.
icals that Control Weeds) for more details. Much of the weed problem can be avoided by early seeding or timely clipping.

Fertilizing or early seeding with bromegrass, orchardgrass or intermediate wheatgrass will give good weed control without using a companion crop. If weeds become a problem, clipping with a mower can effectively reduce competition. Be certain to remove any excess weed clippings to avoid smothering out young alfalfa and grass plants.

**Graze Carefully**

Controlled grazing is another key to successfully using alfalfa-grass mixtures as a pasture crop. Under continuous heavy grazing, alfalfa will disappear after the first or second year, leaving you with only grass.

Rotational grazing is a must for maximum yields and maintaining alfalfa stands. Divide your field with fences and plan a rotation program. Using a week to 10-day grazing interval and allowing up to 28-day rest periods between grazing periods will result in longer-lived stands. This rest time is needed for alfalfa to resupply its root reserves and maintain high production.

Stop grazing by Sept. 15 and keep your livestock off the alfalfa from mid-September to late October. In late October and early November you can graze alfalfa without stand loss after frost has stopped all growth. But take livestock out of the field after grazing the forage to prevent trampling injury to the alfalfa. Don’t winter feed your alfalfa-grass pasture. Alfalfa does not persist under heavy livestock traffic.

**A Tip on Alfalfa-Grass Mixtures**

Brome-alfalfa mixtures frequently do not reach the 50-50 grass-legume mixture the first years. Orchardgrass included in the mixture will give good grass-legume ratios the first years—then bromegrass begins to come in strong, taking over where orchardgrass may have thinned. Check CC 165 (How to Establish New Pastures) for further details. Following are alfalfa-grass pasture mixtures recommended for Nebraska.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alfalfa</th>
<th>Orchardgrass</th>
<th>Smooth bromegrass or intermediate wheatgrass</th>
<th>Intermediate wheatgrass</th>
<th>Alfalfa</th>
<th>Smooth bromegrass</th>
<th>Alfalfa</th>
<th>Intermediate wheatgrass</th>
<th>Alfalfa</th>
<th>Smooth bromegrass</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3-5</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>5-6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10-12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7-10</td>
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