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### Chapter 4: Crop Management of Switchgrass

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# Chapter 4

## Crop Management of Switchgrass

**Matt A. Sanderson, Marty Schmer, Vance Owens,  
Pat Keyser and Wolter Elbersen**

**Abstract** Management of switchgrass for bioenergy and forage share some commonalities, of particular interest in bioenergy crop production is: (1) rapid establishment of switchgrass to generate harvestable biomass in the seeding year, (2) highly efficient management of soil and fertilizer N to minimize external energy inputs, and (3) harvest management to maximize yields of lignocellulose. Bioenergy cropping may entail management for multiple services in addition to biomass yield including soil C sequestration, wildlife habitat, landscape management, and water quality protection. Management is a critical factor especially as land classified as marginal or idle land will be emphasized for bioenergy

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production to reduce conflicts with food production. Marginal land may also be more risky. To date, there has been no long-term commercial production of switchgrass on a large scale and there is little in the way of hands-on, practical farm experience with switchgrass managed as a bioenergy crop. In this chapter, we lay out the key best management practices for switchgrass as a bioenergy crop including establishment, soil fertility, and pest management.

## 4.1 Introduction

Switchgrass management as a bioenergy crop is relatively new. Early in the development of switchgrass as a bio-energy crop it was assumed that management for bioenergy would be similar to forage management [1]. For example, it was assumed that establishment methods and weed management guidelines for switchgrass as a forage crop would work as well for its use as a bioenergy crop. Although management for bioenergy and forage share some commonalities, of particular interest in bioenergy crop production is: (1) rapid establishment of switchgrass to generate harvestable biomass in the seeding year (2) highly efficient management of soil and fertilizer N to minimize external energy inputs, and (3) harvest management to maximize yields of lignocellulose. Harvest management may differ the most between bioenergy and forage cropping because the goal is to maximize yields of lignocellulose in bioenergy rather than to optimize forage yield and forage quality. However, extension material for establishing and managing switchgrass for bioenergy has been developed based on the best-available information [2].

Bioenergy cropping may entail management for multiple services in addition to biomass yield including soil C sequestration, wildlife habitat, landscape management, and water quality protection. Management is a critical factor especially as land classified as marginal or idle land will be emphasized for bioenergy production to reduce conflicts with food production. Marginal land may also be more risky.

Switchgrass has been grown for grazing, hay, and conservation uses for decades and a sizable body of scientific and practical information has been accumulated [3–5]. To date, there has been no long-term commercial production of switchgrass on a large scale and there is little in the way of hands-on, practical farm experience with switchgrass managed as a bioenergy crop. Most of the technical information on the management of switchgrass as a bioenergy crop has come from small-plot research studies, pilot-scale demonstration projects of a few acres, and a handful of field- and farm-scale demonstration projects, such as the Chariton River Valley project in southern Iowa and the Tennessee Biofuels Initiative,<sup>1</sup> which includes 6,000 acres (2,400 ha) of switchgrass in eastern Tennessee.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.iowaswitchgrass.com/>; <http://renewablecarbon.tennessee.edu/Partners.html>

In this chapter, we lay out the key best management practices for switchgrass as a bioenergy crop including establishment, soil fertility, and pest management. Where management protocols translate well from and are firmly founded in forage management, we briefly summarize and direct the reader to the appropriate authoritative source.

## 4.2 Strategic Planning for Bioenergy Crop Management

As mentioned at the outset, there is no large-scale production of switchgrass for bioenergy. When bioenergy cropping matures, however, farmers will need to do some strategic planning regarding production systems. For example, the first planning decision the farmer may face is whether or not to grow switchgrass for bioenergy. Economic considerations (e.g., price paid for biomass, costs of production) will certainly drive that decision but other considerations, such as flexibility to grow other crops in rotation or to manage switchgrass as a forage crop to take advantage of other markets, will affect decisions as well. Knowledge of switchgrass production will also influence decision making. A survey of Tennessee farmers in 2005 indicated that farmers were unfamiliar with switchgrass; however, nearly a third of those surveyed would grow switchgrass if it were profitable. Some of their concerns included the need for technical assistance to grow and manage switchgrass and the lack of developed markets [6]. In a survey of Illinois farmers, most respondents indicated that growing perennial grasses for bioenergy may be worthwhile, however, they had limited knowledge of the grasses and how to grow or manage them [7]. Some of their concerns regarding production included lack of a local market for the biomass and a hesitancy to replace annual row crops with perennial grasses. Farmers who rented land were reluctant to consider perennial grasses because their landlord may not approve of the cropping system change. Most respondents stated that perennial grasses would fit best on their marginal cropland.

The option to use switchgrass both as cattle forage and biomass for energy could offer an attractive incentive for farmers wherever livestock production is an important enterprise. Flexibility in its use could also provide an incentive to adopt switchgrass production as a new enterprise [8].

Strategic planning also includes considerations for site selection for growing switchgrass. Site selection criteria may include suitability of soils for switchgrass production among other factors. Planning for establishment should begin at least one or more years in advance so that soil deficiencies (e.g. low pH) can be corrected or to control weed populations through appropriate crop rotation along with herbicide use.

Other important considerations in the planning process are to consider if the proposed crop rotation has the flexibility to respond to markets or climate with alternative crop choices. Producers should also consider risk assessment and the probability of success and to be completely aware of potential to realize all

outcomes. Risk management practices such as participation in government incentive programs [e.g., the biomass crop assistance program (BCAP)], and the availability of crop insurance should also be considered. In the USA, the BCAP program provides eligible producers reimbursement of up to 75% of the cost of establishing a perennial bioenergy crop along with assistance (up to \$45 per ton) for harvest, transport, and storage of bioenergy crops. Risk management also applies to harvest decisions. Harvesting switchgrass early to obtain quality forage for livestock and using regrowth for biomass may provide flexibility for the producer but can risk stand longevity and future productivity. Managing for a single autumn harvest can maximize yield, whereas allowing the stand to remain in the field over winter to reduce mineral and water levels for efficient harvest and storage risks yield loss.

Proper management is needed to realize the best yields possible for a given land area so as not to replace (or reduce) or compete with land for food production [9]. The importance of proper management was illustrated by Lemus et al. [10] who showed that simply improving agronomic management by controlling weeds and implementing a standard harvest schedule (without N fertilizer) increased yields from 2.3 to 5 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup>.

Implementing appropriate management practices can be an important part of reducing production risk. Appropriate establishment techniques protect against risk of stand failure. Use of best management practices positions the farmer for the best yield response in favorable growing conditions. Similarly, implementing best practices can protect against losses from pests, diseases, and abiotic stresses.

## 4.3 Switchgrass Establishment

### 4.3.1 Site Selection and Preparation

Like most perennial species, switchgrass establishes best on well-drained, fertile soils but it also can establish and persist under highly variable soil conditions. Switchgrass used in bioenergy is likely to be grown on land that is unsuitable for crop production either based on erosion potential or low crop productivity. Switchgrass establishment practices for bioenergy plantings will require rapid establishment and effective weed control.

Proper planning is important for establishment success. Key factors to consider for successful establishment are measuring soil fertility status, proper field preparation, proper cultivar selection, and using high quality seed. Soil sampling before planting is recommended to determine soil nutrient status with the number of soil samples required being dependent on the soil heterogeneity of the land to be converted. At a minimum, soil should be tested for P, K, and pH before planting with subsequent soil sampling every three to five years thereafter. Optimal seed germination occurs between pH of 6–8 [11] but switchgrass seedlings can tolerate

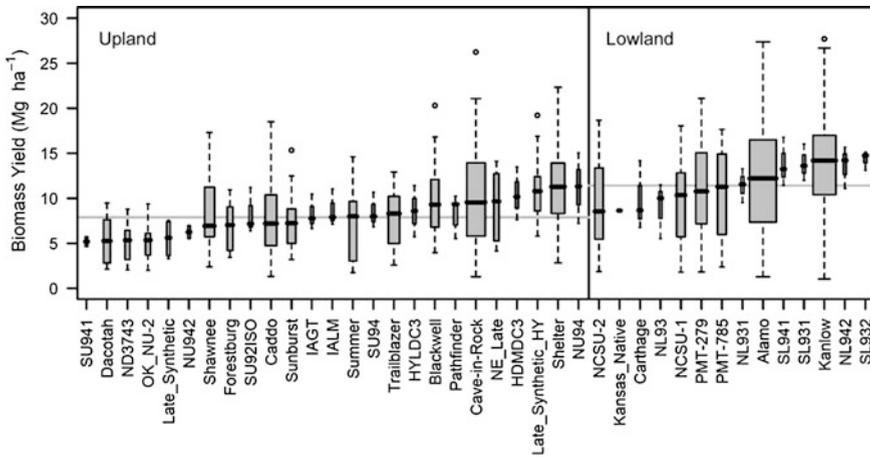
pH values between 3.7 and 7.6 under field conditions [5, 12, 13]. The overall effectiveness of liming before switchgrass establishment has been mixed but liming is likely beneficial on soils with pH values below 5.0 [13].

Planting switchgrass into existing cropland, pastureland, or conservation land requires land management preparation one to two years in advance. For example, scouting for and controlling perennial weeds within fields before switchgrass establishment will minimize stand failures. Allelopathic effects from previous crops on switchgrass establishment have not been well documented but certain crops can increase or decrease the likelihood of successful establishment depending on weed suppression, herbicide carryover, and residue amount. Herbicide-resistant crops in general provide good weed suppression the following year for effective establishment. For example, soybean (*Glycine max* L. Merr.) provides a firm seed bed, minimal residue, and good weed control which are important attributes for successful establishment of switchgrass. High-residue crops, such as maize (*Zea mays* L.) may require heavy duty drills to plant switchgrass under no-till conditions or tillage practices for effective seed-to-soil placement and uniform seeding depth. Establishing switchgrass in former pastureland or conservation land is more challenging and requires multiple management tools such as non-selective herbicides, tillage, and burning.

### 4.3.2 Cultivar Selection

Selecting the proper cultivar is critical for both establishment and persistence. Switchgrass cultivars are morphologically divided into upland and lowland ecotypes (see Chap. 1). Lowland ecotypes are taller, have longer more bluish-green leaves, have longer ligules, are higher yielding, grow like a bunchgrass, are more rust (*Puccinia emaculata* Schwein.; *Puccinia graminis* Pers.; *Uromyces gramincola* Burrill) resistant, and have a coarser stem than upland ecotypes. Upland ecotypes are shorter growing, have a finer stem, and are more tolerant of dry climatic conditions than lowland ecotypes [4]. Within ecotypes there are northern upland, southern upland, northern lowland, and southern lowland strains based on responses to latitudinal effects [14]. Viable switchgrass seed can be produced when lowland ecotypes and upland ecotypes are crossed with the same chromosome number [15]. Development of F1 hybrids derived from upland and lowland ecotypes has shown increased biomass yields compared with the parental lines [16].

Estimates of economic yields of switchgrass biomass vary, but McLaughlin et al. [17] indicated that 9 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> average annual yield across all production areas was economic in the USA. In a meta-analysis of switchgrass biomass yields from 39 sites in 17 states of the USA, lowland ecotypes of switchgrass averaged 12.0 ± 5.9 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> and upland ecotypes averaged 8.7 ± 4.2 Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> (Fig. 4.1; [18]). Based on their empirical model of switchgrass yield, greatest biomass yields were predicted to occur in a region from the mid-Atlantic region to eastern Kansas and Oklahoma.

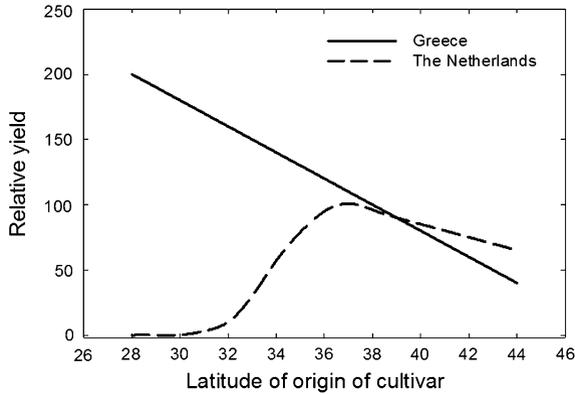


**Fig. 4.1** Variation in biomass yields of upland and lowland switchgrasses at several locations in the USA (from Wullschlegler et al. [18], with permission, copyright American Society of Agronomy)

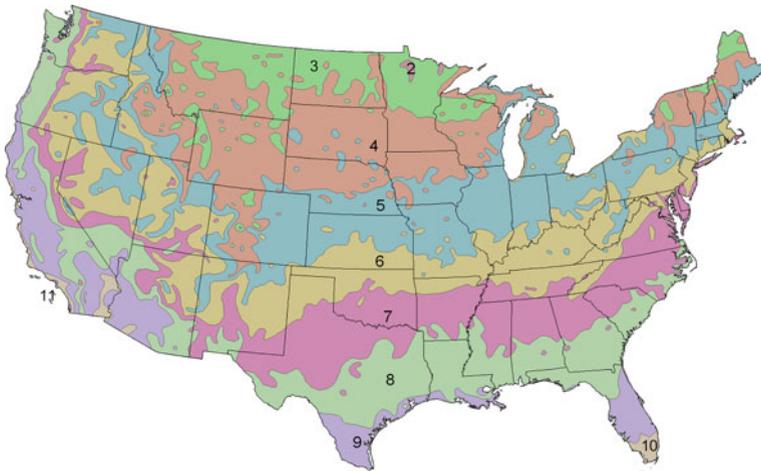
European research also indicates that lowland ecotypes yielded more than upland ecotypes. Averaged over four years and two systems of cutting in Italy, lowland ecotypes averaged  $14.9 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1}$ , whereas upland ecotypes averaged  $11.7 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1}$  [19]. Yields for several switchgrass varieties ranged from  $7.1$  to  $21.3 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1}$  during four years in Greece and  $0.9$ – $26.1 \text{ Mg ha}^{-1}$  in Italy [20].

Switchgrass is photoperiod sensitive, requiring short days to induce flowering [21]; however, there is variation among switchgrass cultivars in photoperiod response [22, 23]. When switchgrass is grown north of the original adaptation area, it is exposed to longer photoperiods resulting in a longer vegetative stage and more biomass is produced than existing populations originating within that latitudinal environment. Switchgrass populations moved south of their original adaptation area produce less biomass than in their original adaptation area because floral initiation begins earlier. Switchgrass populations moved too far north in a temperate climate do not survive the winter because the plants do not cold harden before the onset of freezing temperatures. Switchgrass populations that originated in high latitudes or low latitudes within the United States have the most defined plant responses to latitude [14]. Generally, switchgrass cultivars should not be planted more than one hardiness zone (Fig. 4.2) north of their area of origin [4, 24]. Longitudinal response by switchgrass populations is less defined than latitudinal responses and is variety specific [24].

The optimal latitude for growing a specific switchgrass variety will also differ between Europe and North America. For example, the cultivar Cave-in-Rock, which originates in southern Illinois USA ( $38.30^\circ$  North), is probably best adapted to northwest Europe (Netherlands and United Kingdom  $\sim 52^\circ$  North) [25]. When cultivars are grown too far north, they may not survive winter or have reduced



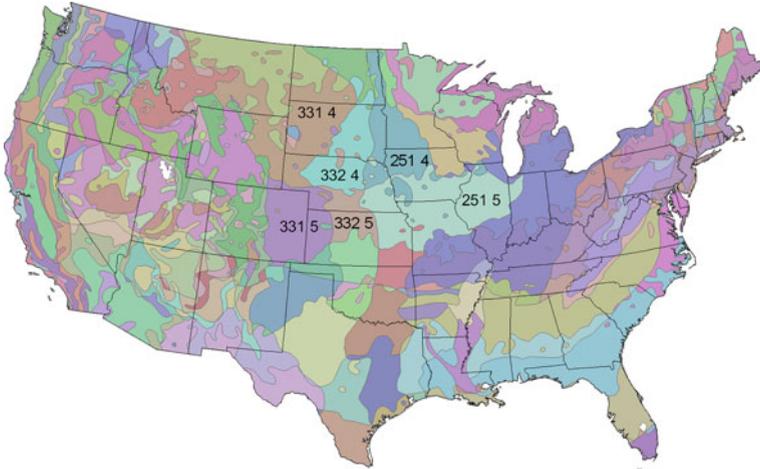
**Fig. 4.2** Expected relative yields of varieties from low and high latitude of origin when grown at a Northern location (52° north, the Netherlands) and at a southern location (38°, Greece) (from Elbersen, with permission)



**Fig. 4.3** USDA plant hardiness zones for the 48 contiguous states in the USA (<http://www.usna.usda.gov/Hardzone/ushzmap.html>). Switchgrass cultivars should not be planted more than one hardiness zone north of their area of origin. The average minimum annual temperature (°C) ranges by zone: zone 1, <-45.6; zone 2, -45.5 to -40; zone 3, -39.9 to -34.5; zone 4, -34.5 to -28.9; zone 5, -28.8 to -23.4; zone 6, -23.3 to -17.8; zone 7, -17.7 to -12.3; zone 8, -12.2 to -6.7; zone 9, -6.6 to -1.2; zone 10, -1.1 to 4.4; zone 11, >4.5

stand life. A generalized relationship between latitude of origin of a cultivar and the yield at a southern and northern site in Europe is illustrated in Fig. 4.3.

Cultivars originating from the semi-arid Great Plains may be more susceptible to disease when established in more humid locations, whereas cultivars originating in humid climates may be less adapted to the drought conditions of semi-arid



**Fig. 4.4** Plant adaptation region map for the 48 contiguous states of the USA (from [26]). Plant adaptation regions are derived from combining ecoregion and plant hardiness zone classification systems. Example plant adaptation regions labeled include the Great Plains Steppe hardiness zones 4 and 5 (331-4, 331-5, 331-5, and 332-5) and the Prairie Parkland Temperate hardiness zones 4 and 5 (251-4 and 251-5)

climates. Plant adaptation regions define suitable environments for leading switchgrass populations (Fig. 4.4, [26]).

The majority of released switchgrass cultivars were developed for conservation or traits desirable for pasture grazing. Current switchgrass varieties tend to be from (1) seed increases from random plants originating from a remnant prairie or (2) improved cultivars based on selection of defined traits such as yield, digestibility, seed dormancy, or disease resistance [27], see Chap. 2]. Most improved switchgrass cultivars have been developed in the Central Plains of the USA. Breeding for specific bioenergy traits (e.g. low lignin, high cellulose) will be dependent on the conversion process used within a given region [1].

### 4.3.3 Seed Quality

Seed quality attributes include viability, purity, cleanliness, and vigor [28]. Seed vigor relates to the ability of a seed to germinate and establish a viable seedling under field conditions (see Chap. 3). Growing conditions, harvest timing, seed drying, cleaning and processing procedures, storage conditions, field sanitation, diseases, and insects influence switchgrass seed quality [28]. Agronomic practices that improve seed quality include N fertilization, use of row cultivation, spring burning, and control of smut (*Tilletia maclaganii* (Berk.) G.P. Clinton) and rust. Selection for increased seed size can increase viability and vigor. Average seed

weight for switchgrass is 850 seeds  $\text{g}^{-1}$  but variation exists among and within cultivars for seed size [5]. High germination rates and greater emergence have been reported for switchgrass seed with higher than average seed weights [29, 30]. Under field conditions, switchgrass seedlings from heavy seed had greater germination and earlier growth than lighter seed but no growth differences were detected 8–10 week after emergence [31].

#### 4.3.3.1 Seed Quality Tests

Standard germination and purity tests have limited utility in the direct calculation of planting rates for switchgrass. Pure live seed (PLS) is used in expressing seed quality and determining recommended field seeding rates. Pure live seed is calculated as:  $\text{PLS (\%)} = [\text{seed purity (\%)} \times \text{seed germination (\%)}] / 100$ . Switchgrass germination testing protocols from the Association of Official Seed Analysts include a 14 day cold stratification ( $5^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) period before germination testing, which reduces the amount of primary dormancy found in switchgrass. The germination percentage found on seed tags tends to overestimate the percent of viable seeds, which complicates determining proper field seeding rates [13]. Germination trials without cold stratification are recommended if seed dormancy is expected [5]. Seed vigor tests that evaluate emergence from depth or accelerated aging tests have been recommended as alternative methods in determining field seeding rates [32, 33]. Switchgrass seed lots with the same germination percentage but different seedling vigor have resulted in emergence differences of more than 40% [28].

#### 4.3.3.2 Dormancy

Seed dormancy reduces seedling vigor and establishment. Dormant seed can be defined as seed that is unable to germinate even when subjected to suitable conditions [34]. The mechanisms for seed dormancy of switchgrass are complex but the expression of seed dormancy is caused by structures that surround the embryo and mechanisms within the embryo [35]. Dormancy is likely caused by genetics and environmental effects during seed production, harvesting, and processing. Genetic selection for low dormancy seed has been shown to lower overall primary dormancy in lowland ecotypes [36]. Primary dormancy of switchgrass seed can generally be broken by an after-ripening period or by cold stratification [4]. After-ripened switchgrass seed is generally one-year-old or more. Switchgrass seed that is stored for three or more years at room temperature may have poor seedling vigor and reduced establishment [28]. Secondary or latent dormancy occurs when viable seed becomes dormant after unfavorable environmental conditions [35]. Environmental or chemical methods can be used to break secondary dormancy. Seeds that have undergone secondary dormancy-breaking techniques but still demonstrate low germination have residual dormancy [37]. Residual dormancy can be reduced in switchgrass when endogenous levels of nitric oxide

(NO) and reactive oxygen species (ROS) are altered [38]. High abscisic acid (ABA) levels can increase dormancy in monocot seeds [39]. Exogenous ABA and diphenyleioidonium levels in switchgrass seeds are believed to block germination by restricting ROS and NO activity [38]. Gibberellic acid, sodium nitroprusside, potassium ferrocyanide, potassium nitrate, polyethylene glycol, and hydrogen peroxide have been used to reduce residual dormancy in switchgrass but overall success of each treatment is cultivar-specific [40, 41].

#### **4.3.3.3 Seed Treatments**

Several seed treatments have been investigated for their ability to increase switchgrass germination and establishment. Seed priming, an osmotic process where seed is hydrated to a level where metabolic activity begins but radicle emergence does not occur, may enhance switchgrass germination [42, 43]. Seed water uptake is regulated when priming media such as synthetic calcium silicate is used as a water source until equilibrium between the seed and media is reached. Hydrogen peroxide treatment of non-dormant switchgrass seeds increased seed germination and emergence along with more uniform development of seedlings [38]. Sodium nitroprusside, a NO donor, promoted germination of the lowland ecotype Kanlow [37]. Field conditions at planting influenced overall effectiveness of primed seed [42]. Blending primed and non-primed seed may reduce overall seeding costs and increase stand establishment under variable field conditions [44]. Karrikinolide [3-methyl-2H-furo[2,3-c]pyran-2-one], a compound from smoke that has been found to promote germination and seedling establishment in several native species, did not increase switchgrass germination or seedling vigor [45]. Switchgrass seeds coated with fungicides have been used in humid climates to increase seedling emergence; however, it is unclear if fungicide application limits the symbiotic relationship between switchgrass and arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi. Insecticides have also been shown to improve establishment [46] and can be used as a seed coating applied before planting.

#### **4.3.4 Seedbed Preparation**

Switchgrass can grow under variable soil conditions ranging from sand to clay loam [5]. Switchgrass has been successfully established under various tillage practices but side-by-side tillage studies and preceding crop comparisons have been limited [13]. Switchgrass is mainly established through direct seeding using a culti-packer seeder, grain drill, or no-till drill. Seed-drill calibration is necessary to ensure proper seeding rates. Broadcast seeding also has been used in conservation plantings but lack of stand uniformity may limit its potential use for bioenergy plantings. Seedbed preparation likely will be predicated on equipment accessibility, soil erosion concerns, preceding crop, and initial soil moisture conditions.

A firm seed bed is recommended for proper seed placement regardless of planting method since switchgrass is planted at a shallow depth. Planting switchgrass using conventional tillage methods is a common practice for effective establishment. A grain drill with a small-seed box and small-seed tube attachment or a culti-packer seeder is effective in establishing switchgrass under conventional tillage practices. Conventional tillage can control or reduce cool-season weed populations before seeding as well as reduce residue from previous cropping systems that may interfere with proper seed placement. Soil temperatures will be higher under conventional tillage than no-tillage practices during a spring seeding. Following a tillage practice, soil clods need to be reduced or eliminated by successive tillage, packing, or firming the soil to provide good seed-to-soil contact at time of planting. Soil firming before seeding has been more effective in switchgrass establishment than soil firming after seeding [47]. Conventional tillage practices are not recommended on fields with steep slopes because of the risk of soil erosion. Soil carbon loss via CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from tilled soil is also a concern, especially on land that was previously in set-aside programs or other perennial grassland systems which tend to maintain high levels of soil carbon [48]. No-tillage seeding of switchgrass has also been effective under variable climate conditions and previous cropping systems. No-tillage practices have been successful in establishing switchgrass in existing grasslands and are highly effective on soybean stubble [49]. A no-till drill is recommended when planting in sod or heavy residue because the drill has coulters to remove residue before seed placement and it is heavier than a conventional grain drill. No-tillage seeding provides greater water conservation benefits than conventional tillage especially near the soil surface. For bioenergy purposes, both pre-emergent and post-emergent herbicides are critical under no-tillage practices to control or reduce weed populations during the establishment year.

### ***4.3.5 Fertilization***

Nitrogen fertilizer is not recommended during the planting year because N will encourage weed growth, increase competition for establishing seedlings, increase establishment cost, and increase economic risk associated with establishment if stands should fail [49]. Sanderson and Reed [50] found that there was no biomass yield response to N at rates of 22 or 112 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> during the establishment year of switchgrass and indicated that switchgrass was able to use the available N found in the soil during the establishment year. Starter fertilizer (9 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> and 27 kg P ha<sup>-1</sup>) applied at planting did not improve switchgrass establishment or initial yields [51]. As stated earlier, soil tests (P, K, pH) are recommended before planting. Phosphorus levels (Bray & Kurtz #1 method) should exceed 25 mg kg<sup>-1</sup> when establishing warm-season grasses [52, 53]. Phosphorus and K levels are generally adequate for switchgrass growth in most agricultural fields.

### 4.3.6 *When to Plant*

Successful establishment of switchgrass seedlings is determined by seeding depth, soil texture, soil moisture, and soil temperature [13]. Soil temperatures above 20°C are required for switchgrass germination and seedling growth [54, 55]. Optimal germination of several switchgrass cultivars was found to be between 27 and 30°C [56] but germination tolerance to temperature varies by cultivar [57]. Switchgrass has a panicoid type of seedling root development (see Chap. 3) which places the crown node (from which adventitious roots develop) near the soil surface by elongation of the subcoleptile internode or mesocotyl [58]. The subcoleptile internode has a relatively small xylem cross-sectional area in most warm-season grasses. This limits the amount of water and nutrients that can be transported from the primary root system to developing leaf area and contributes to seed establishment failure in warm-season grasses before adventitious roots develop [59]. Selection for low crown node placement (i.e., a shorter subcoleptile internode) increased switchgrass seedling survival in the southern Great Plains [60]. Greater planting depths reduce warm-season seedling emergence [61]. Recommended planting depths for switchgrass are 0.5–2 cm [4] but seeding depths of 3 cm have been recommended on coarse textured soils [13].

The most important factor for switchgrass to develop adventitious roots is adequate soil surface moisture over a period of time [62]. Rainfall frequencies between 7 and 10 days were found to be crucial for seedling survival under south central US climate conditions [63]. Under favorable environmental conditions, warm-season grasses initiate adventitious roots at 2–4 weeks after emergence [59]. Switchgrass will typically have one adventitious root by the three-leaf emergence stage [62]. Adventitious roots have a larger xylem cross-sectional area than the subcoleptile internode resulting in higher water uptake and nutrient absorption than the primary root system [59].

Seeding dates for warm-season grasses are recommended in early spring when soil moisture is not limiting and soil temperatures are low enough to cold-stratify seeds. For the Northeast United States, switchgrass planting is recommended 3 weeks before and 3 weeks after corn planting [64]. In Iowa, switchgrass planted in mid-April to early May had higher dry matter production than when planted later in the season [65]. Planting during late April to mid-May was optimum for warm-season grasses in mid-latitude areas of the United States [54, 55]. In Nebraska, planting in March resulted in higher standing crop biomass than April or May plantings [66]. Dormant planting (late autumn) or frost seeding (late winter) may be used to establish switchgrass for conservation purposes.

### 4.3.7 *Seeding Rate*

Recommended seeding rates for switchgrass are 200–400 pure live seeds (PLS) m<sup>-2</sup>. With excellent weed control, however, a seeding rate of 107 PLS m<sup>-2</sup> gave adequate stands for conservation plantings [67]. Seeding rates of 4.48–11.20 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> resulted

in similar biomass yields during post-establishment years in the southeast US [68]. Lower seeding rates are recommended for regions with limited rainfall but this recommendation is based on conservation plantings and may not be appropriate for bioenergy-specific plantings. Switchgrass swards appear to regulate plant density depending on the climate conditions and initial seedling density with low seedling density tending to increase with sward age and high seedling density tending to decrease until equilibrium has been reached for a particular site.

#### ***4.3.8 Mixed Species Planting***

Mixed species plantings are common for conservation and forage purposes and may be useful for bioenergy purposes as well. The use of low-input high-diversity mixtures has been proposed as a sustainable way to produce bioenergy on degraded land [69]. Species and cultivar selection is important for long-term success and should have similar growth characteristics, seed vigor, forage quality characteristics, maturity dates, and tolerance to selected herbicides. Warm-season grass species of big bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii* Vitman), indiagrass [*Sorghastrum nutans* (L.) Nash], switchgrass and little bluestem [*Schizachyrium scoparium* (Michx.) Nash] were the dominant species of tallgrass prairie in North America. These species are common in mixtures for set-aside plantings within the central US. A positive relationship has been found between soil heterogeneity and plant diversity for grassland ecosystems. Planting mixed species would likely increase establishment success on areas with variable soil types or topography by allowing certain species to grow based on broad or narrow niche requirements. When switchgrass is planted as a mixture with other perennial grasses, it is recommended that no more than 20% of the seeds should be switchgrass [5].

In a multilocation study in Minnesota, biomass yield increased by 28% when species richness of mixtures increased from 1 to 8 species; however, there was no further yield increase at species richness levels of 8–24 species [70]. In most instances, only a few species produced most of the biomass yield. A comparison of warm-season grass monocultures with polycultures of 4–16 species of grasses and forbs demonstrated that monocultures produced more biomass more economically than polycultures [71]. Observational research on conservation grasslands in the northeastern USA indicated a negative relationship between plant species diversity and biomass production [72].

Companion crops have been used successfully to establish perennial grasses especially when herbicide options are limited. Advantages to companion crops include reduced erosion potential under conventional tillage along with a potential cash crop that can be harvested, which may reduce overall establishment costs especially if a switchgrass stand failure occurs. Companion crops also reduce weed populations during switchgrass establishment but management practices are important to ensure proper establishment. A disadvantage to using companion crops is that in certain regions, an establishment year switchgrass harvest is not

possible because of limited biomass. Switchgrass has been successfully established under maize and sorghum-sudangrass (*Sorghum bicolor* × *sudanense*) [73, 74]. Winter wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.), spring oat (*Avena sativa* L.) and other annual cool-season grasses managed as a hay crop have been successfully used for establishing perennial grasses like switchgrass. Soybean planted in wide rows (76 cm) can be used in cooler regions where row canopy closure is delayed until late-summer. Seeding densities for the companion crop should be reduced from optimal monoculture plantings to allow more light to reach the switchgrass seedling.

Establishing switchgrass on land formerly in set-aside programs or pastures has been done using either conventional tillage or no-tillage methods [13]. Management practices for effective establishment may include autumn or spring hay harvest, prescribed burning in autumn or spring, pre- and post-herbicide treatments, tillage, and the use of companion crops. Planting set-aside land or pastures with herbicide-resistant soybeans or spring-planted cover crop mixtures one to two years before switchgrass establishment may also be an effective management tool for seedbed preparation.

### ***4.3.9 Weed and Pest Control During the Establishment Year***

Weed competition is a major reason for switchgrass stand failure during establishment. Acceptable switchgrass production can be delayed by one or more years by weed competition and poor stand establishment [75]. The most common weeds in establishing warm-season grasses are annual grasses such as crabgrass [*Digitaria sanguinalis* (L.) Scop.], green foxtail [*Setaria viridis* (L.) Beauv.], yellow foxtail [*Setaria glauca* (L.) Beauv.], autumn panicum (*Panicum dichotomiflorum* Michx.), and barnyardgrass [*Echinochloa crusgalli* (L.) Beauv.] [76]. The recommended practice of controlling weeds in fields planted with switchgrass is with the use of pre-emergent herbicides particularly for annual grass control. Non-selective herbicides, such as glyphosate [N-(phosphonomethyl) glycine] are effective in weed control before switchgrass emergence especially under no-till plantings. *It is important to follow all herbicide regulations, label directions, and safety precautions. Extension staff or professional advisors should be consulted regarding proper use and application of all herbicides.*

Atrazine [2-chloro-N-ethyl-N'-(1-methylethyl)-1, 3, 5-triazine-2, 4-diamine] has been an effective herbicide during switchgrass establishment controlling mainly cool-season annual grasses and broadleaf weeds [65, 77]. Switchgrass biomass yields were higher with atrazine application than without [52, 77]. Quinclorac (3, 7-dichloro-8-quinolinecarboxylic acid) is another effective herbicide in establishing switchgrass [2, 78]. Quinclorac controls warm-season annual grasses such as giant foxtail [*Setaria faberi* (L.) Beauv.], yellow foxtail, green foxtail, and barnyardgrass along with a limited number of broadleaf species [79]. Switchgrass treated with a pre-emergent combination of quinclorac and atrazine

had greater biomass yields and comparable switchgrass stand frequencies compared with switchgrass treated with atrazine or quinclorac alone and both herbicides were equally effective on upland and lowland ecotypes [80]. Post-emergent application of quinclorac reduced switchgrass yields compared with atrazine but was highly effective in controlling annual grasses [81]. Pre-emergent applications of imazethapyr {2-[4,5-dihydro-4-methyl-4-(1-methylethyl)-5-oxo-1H-imidazol-2-yl]-5-ethyl-3-pyridine-carboxylic acid} has been effective in switchgrass establishment [82]. Post-emergent sulfosulfuron [1-(4,6-dimethoxypyrimidin-2-yl)-3-(2-ethylsulfonylimidazo[1,2-a]pyridin-3-yl)sulfonylurea] applications on switchgrass are more effective in controlling smooth pigweed (*Amaranthus hybridus* L.) than quinclorac but are less effective on annual grasses [78]. The use of 2,4-D (2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid) is cost effective for broadleaf weed control when applied post-emergence at the 4- or 5-leaf stage. Broadleaf weed control using a mechanical treatment (mowing) can be successful when broadleaf weeds are taller than switchgrass and the mowing application can be done to minimize switchgrass leaf loss [83]. After successful establishment, only limited herbicide use should be necessary.

Research on pest and disease control on switchgrass grown for bioenergy has been limited. Establishment year insecticide applications like carbofuran (2,3-dihydro-2,2-dimethyl-7-benzofuranyl) have had variable success on switchgrass yield and stands [13, 84]. Insect injury on switchgrass seedlings is dependent on climatic conditions, seeding dates, and weed populations. Outbreaks of rust and smut can occur during the establishment year but are generally more likely to occur post-establishment.

#### ***4.3.10 How to Evaluate Establishment Success***

A grass seedling is considered fully established when adventitious roots are formed, able to overwinter, and survive the following growing season [85, 86]. Switchgrass seedlings must develop two or more tillers to survive winter [87]. At the field-scale, switchgrass stands are evaluated based on morphological development, weed control, and seedling density. Integrating a global position system receiver and the use of geographic information systems (GIS) with ground-based scouting tools can assist in quantifying stand densities and weed populations across fields. Maps can be generated using GIS-derived data to identify areas within fields for possible reseeding or weed control measures. Switchgrass will typically not reach full yield potential until 1–2 years after the establishment year. Under normal weather conditions and proper agronomic management, switchgrass can achieve  $\geq 50\%$  of full yield potential during the establishment year [75]. Harvesting switchgrass in the establishment year reduces farm-gate production costs and improves economic returns [88].

The definition of an acceptable stand density is dependent on the desired management goal. Stand densities of  $\geq 10$  seedlings  $\text{m}^{-2}$  are acceptable for conservation purposes [89–91], whereas switchgrass managed for grazing or bioenergy purposes will require higher initial stand densities. Establishment year stands of  $>20$  switchgrass seedlings  $\text{m}^{-2}$  with minimal weed pressure are considered to be fully successful, whereas stands between 10 and 20 seedlings  $\text{m}^{-2}$  are considered adequate, and stands below 10 seedlings  $\text{m}^{-2}$  may require reseeding. Switchgrass has the ability to produce similar biomass yield under different seedling densities as a result of compensatory responses to tiller number and sizes [50]. When comparing recommended seeding rates (200–400 PLS  $\text{m}^{-2}$ ) and desired seedling densities, planted seed to established seedling success rate is generally  $<20\%$ .

Stand frequency measurements have been used to quantify seeding establishment and assess grassland improvements [92, 93]. Frequency is determined by the number of samples in which a species occurs, within a given area, and is expressed as a percentage of the total. Vogel and Masters [93] developed a frequency grid tool that can be used to assess plant populations at numerous sampling areas within a field and provide a conservative estimate of stand density. In a study conducted in the northern Great Plains USA on 10 farms, switchgrass fields with stand frequency of 40% or greater provided a successful establishment year stand threshold for subsequent post planting year biomass yields [75]. The frequency grid tool was designed for monitoring plantings under culti-pack drop seeders or conventional seed drills. Switchgrass planted into wider drill rows ( $>38$  cm) may require alternative methods to quantify establishment success, such as a frequency rod or line transects [77, 94].

## **4.4 Soil Fertility and Crop Fertilization in the Established Stand**

Fertilizer requirements of switchgrass managed for bioenergy depend on yield potential, soil productivity, management practices, and weather. Most switchgrass fertility research has focused on N because it is often the most limiting nutrient [95–97], and before 1990 the primary goal was to better understand the effect of fertility on switchgrass grown for forage rather than bioenergy [98]. This is an important consideration because a biomass harvest, especially in northern environments, is often done around a killing frost in the autumn when some nutrients will have been translocated to underground tissue [99].

### **4.4.1 Nitrogen**

Optimum N rates for switchgrass managed for bioenergy vary by geographic region, environmental and weather conditions (specifically precipitation),

N-supplying capability of the soil, and harvest frequency [97, 100–103]. Maximum yields of ‘Kanlow’ switchgrass were achieved with 448 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> applied in April in a 3-cut system in Oklahoma [97]. Multiple harvests each year and high N application rates, however, had a greater negative effect on average annual biomass production than a single harvest system over a four-year period at one of two study sites and was not economically feasible. Aravindhakshan et al. [100] concluded that harvesting once annually and applying only 69 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> was most economical in a similar environment. In a comparison of a 1- or 2-cut system with added N (50 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> with one cut or 100 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> with two cuts), Lemus et al. [102] noted that N removal was significantly greater in the 2-cut system because of the high concentration of N in the mid-summer harvest. Although mean switchgrass yields were slightly higher in the 2-cut, 100 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> system than in a 1-cut, 50 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> system, they concluded that the cost of additional inputs and greater N removal rates would not be worth the small yield increase. Applying 56 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> increased switchgrass biomass production in several locations in South Dakota, USA, but application rates above this amount resulted in no further yield advantage and increased weed pressure [103]. Switchgrass response to N levels up to 220 kg ha<sup>-1</sup> was linear or quadratic in Iowa, USA [104].

Applying 10–12 kg N ha<sup>-1</sup> for each Mg ha<sup>-1</sup> biomass removed under a single late-summer or autumn harvest is recommended in the Midwest USA [99]. This allows for replacement of N removed in biomass because switchgrass typically contains 60–120 kg N Mg<sup>-1</sup>. Regardless of amount applied, N is typically applied after green-up in the spring to minimize weed encroachment, particularly from invasive cool-season grasses.

Nitrogen response of switchgrass may depend on harvest management. For example, in western Europe, switchgrass generally is harvested after senescence in winter (i.e., delayed harvest) and yield response to N is minimal, even if the crop is grown for many years with no fertilizer N [105, 106]. The low N removal (because of N recycling within the plant) combined with high rates of atmospheric N deposition and generally high soil N levels probably contribute to the lack of a N response in delayed harvest switchgrass in Europe.

#### ***4.4.2 Phosphorus and Potassium***

Less research has been done relative to P and K fertilization of switchgrass for biomass or forage. Recommendations for P and K application are based on soil test levels and soil characteristics, [101]. There was no response of switchgrass to P application at two locations in Texas, USA over a 3 or 7 year period [96]. Switchgrass production increased when P and N or P, K, and N were applied together with lime compared to N alone on five different soils in Louisiana, USA [107]; however, the authors speculated that response to P fertilization would be limited without N.

Switchgrass grown on acid soils ( $\text{pH} < 5$ ) may be subjected to P deficiencies. Switchgrass performs better on acid soils when grown in symbioses with arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi [108, 109]. Phosphorus may be more available to plants with this association because arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi are better able to access more soil P.

### 4.4.3 Lime

Switchgrass has limited response to lime. In a greenhouse pot experiment with five acidic soils, yield did not increase when soil pH was brought to 6.5 with lime [107]. A yield response was noted, however, when N and P or N, P, and K were co-applied with lime. On a strongly acid ( $\text{pH}$  4.3–4.9) soil in Pennsylvania, USA, untreated switchgrass yielded approximately 50% of that receiving the high lime and fertilizer rate [110].

### 4.4.4 Manure

Cattle manure may be used as a source of nutrients on switchgrass. Lee et al. [111] compared three equivalent N rates (0, 112, and 224  $\text{kg ha}^{-1}$ ) of cattle manure or ammonium nitrate and found that switchgrass yields increased with the medium application rate of either N source. However, ammonium nitrate had a greater deleterious effect on switchgrass stand persistence and weed encroachment than the equivalent rate of manure. They speculated that this may have been due to the slow release of N from manure compared to the rapid availability of N from ammonium nitrate. Switchgrass biomass yields increased linearly with dairy manure applied at rates of 0–600  $\text{kg N ha}^{-1}$  [112]. Switchgrass filter strips effectively reduced concentrations of nutrients and pollutants in runoff water from the dairy manure-treated plots.

## 4.5 Pest and Weed Management in the Established Stand

### 4.5.1 Diseases

A number of diseases have been reported in the literature for switchgrass. Disease pressure will likely increase if large scale production of switchgrass for bioenergy is realized [13]. Rust (*Puccinia emaculata*) has been found on switchgrass in central and eastern South Dakota. Rust symptoms have been more severe on cultivars of northern origin; however, heritability exists for rust resistance [113]. Other diseases reported in a review by Vogel [5] include anthracnose

[*Colletotrichum graminicola* (CES) G.W. Wils; now suggested to be caused by *Colletotricum navitas* J.A. Crouch [114]], smuts [*T. maclaganii* (Berk.) G.P. Clinton], Phoma leaf spot (*Phoma spp.*), and *Fusarium* root rot (*Fusarium spp.*). Trailblazer switchgrass seemed to be more susceptible to anthracnose than Cave-in-Rock in Pennsylvania [115]. Reduced switchgrass biomass and seed yields were attributed to smut in several production fields in Iowa, USA in the late 1990s [116]. Smut was found in 15 of 17 fields surveyed, and the authors estimated that 50–82% of the area in switchgrass production was infested with *T. maclaganii*. Fields with smut incidence >50% yielded less than half of the expected biomass and some seed production fields were a total loss in 1999 [116]. Thomsen et al. [117] estimated yield losses from *T. maclaganii* of 2–40% in switchgrass fields sampled in Iowa, USA, and noted the critical need for research on disease management approaches if switchgrass is to be a successful biomass crop.

### 4.5.2 Insects

Few insects have been identified as potential pests of switchgrass; however, damage from insects may increase if or when switchgrass monocultures are grown on large production fields. Distribution and symptoms of a stem-boring caterpillar (*Blastobasis repartella* Dietz.) were described by Prasifka et al. [118]. In this survey *B. repartella* was consistently found in cultivated and natural switchgrass stands in eight northern states. In the four northern states (Illinois, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin), sampling indicated that 1–7% of tillers were damaged by *B. repartella* [118]. A new species of gall midge [*Chilophaga virgate* Gagne (Diptera: *Cecidomyiidae*)] was recently discovered in South Dakota, USA [119]. Proportion of tillers infested with the gall midge in 10 switchgrass genotypes ranged from 7 to 22%, mass of infested tillers was 35% lower than normal tillers, and infested tillers produced no appreciable seed. Grasshoppers (*Orthoptera*) are known to feed on switchgrass, but the extent of the damage has not been quantified [13].

### 4.5.3 Weeds

In established stands of switchgrass, weed pressure during the second growing season is often worse than in subsequent years if there was poor site occupancy by switchgrass seedlings during the seeding year. In that scenario, a number of weeds can become established during or after the first summer. The problem is often compounded because where site occupancy may not have been high during the seeding year, stand vigor still may be reduced in the second year and, therefore, vulnerability to weed competition may be increased. With adequate weed control during the first two years of a stand, subsequent problems with competition can be limited in switchgrass managed as a biofuel feedstock.

Cool-season annual weeds usually are not a concern in switchgrass unless the infestation is severe. In such cases, use of either a broadleaf formulation (2,4-D, dicamba {3,6-dichloro-2-methoxybenzoic acid}, picloram {4-amino-3,5,6-trichloro-2-pyridinecarboxylic acid}, metsulfuron {2-[[[(4-methoxy-6-methyl-1,3,5-triazin-2-yl)amino]carbonyl]amino]sulfonyl]benzoic acid}, sulfosulfuron, or aminopyralid {4-amino-3,6-dichloro-2-pyridinecarboxylic acid} active ingredients) or a broad-spectrum herbicide, such as glyphosate, will provide effective control; where grasses are the concern, the latter is the proper choice. A burn-down chemical, such as paraquat {1,1'-dimethyl-4,4'-bipyridinium}, is also an option in that instance. It is important to apply non-selective herbicides before the switchgrass breaks dormancy to avoid crop injury.

*It is important to follow all herbicide regulations, label directions, and safety precautions. Extension staff or professional advisors should be consulted regarding proper use and application of all herbicides.*

Cool-season perennial weeds are relatively easy to control in switchgrass because their growing season differs from that of switchgrass. Dormant-season applications of glyphosate can be used to control cool-season grasses. Switchgrass has modest tolerance to glyphosate early in the growing season [120], which allows some flexibility in terms of timing spring treatments. Regardless, it is best to use glyphosate before spring dormancy break or in autumn after switchgrass is fully dormant.

Summer annual weeds are usually not a problem unless the switchgrass stand density is low. Aggressive competitors such as crabgrass or seedling johnsongrass [*Sorghum halapense* L. (Pers)] usually will not establish and compete after switchgrass has developed a full canopy and is able to overtop these species. However, where grass weeds do persist imazethapyr [for crabgrass and signalgrass (*Brachiaria platyphylla* (Munro ex C. Wright) Nash)], quinclorac [for foxtails (*Setaria* species) and (*Echinochloa crus-galli* (L.) P. Beauv.)], or sulfosulfuron (for johnsongrass) can be useful, but generally must be applied when weeds are small (6–20 cm, depending on the weed species). Warm-season broadleaf weeds may be controlled with the same herbicides used during the cool-season, except that broad-spectrum chemicals should not be used once switchgrass is growing actively.

Low-growing summer perennial weeds often are not able to compete with well-established stands of switchgrass. Johnsongrass, on the other hand, can persist in switchgrass stands because of its tall growth habit. Lowland varieties of switchgrass typically will outcompete johnsongrass. Where that does not occur, and control is still necessary, sulfosulfuron can be effective. Perennial warm-season broadleaf weeds can be controlled with the same herbicides that are used to control cool- or warm-season annuals. With perennials, attention must be paid to stage of plant development because it affects application timing and rates.

As with any use of herbicides, attention should be paid to crops that may be planted on the site in the next 12 months because they may be sensitive to some herbicides. Also, there are some scenarios in which producers may want to use some part of the switchgrass crop otherwise intended for biofuels for livestock

forage. In such cases, it is important to consider animal feeding restrictions stated on the herbicide label in deciding which product to use for weed control.

Early-season prescribed fire can also be effective for weed control [76]. Switchgrass should not be burned after mid-April, for the southerly and middle latitudes of the USA, so as not to reduce biomass yield [120]. There must be adequate fuel to carry a fire. In some cases, dense stands of early spring weeds, and the large amount of green vegetation they may produce, can hamper burning. Burning earlier (early to mid-March) may be effective before the weed cover becomes too dense. Clipping or mowing may be useful but will reduce yields if it occurs beyond the very early portion of the growing season. If there is a risk of a particularly undesirable weed going to seed or weeds otherwise reducing stand vigor or quality, clipping may be the desirable choice despite potential short-term reduction in yield.

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