



PLAN FOR 2024 WITH LATE SUMMER PLANTING

By Robin Newell, Alfalfa Product Marketing Director, S&W Seed Company

Spring 2023 was no ‘Goldilocks’ spring to be sure. Whether too dry or too wet, too slow to warm up, or simply slammed with the time crunch of annual crop planting, there were geographic areas that didn’t get the opportunity to plant newly seeded alfalfa fields to the desired extent.

Take advantage of late summer alfalfa seeding to get a jump on next year’s yield. Slow initial growth during the 6-8 week establishment phase of alfalfa cuts off a significant portion of the growing season yield potential when alfalfa is planted in spring. For that reason, establishment year yields don’t measure up to second year yields in this perennial crop. But there’s a work-around for farmers who have open ground in late summer. Alfalfa seedlings in late summer can be very successful and it’s a great time of year to plant a new stand if soil moisture is adequate for stand establishment.

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Late summer planting offers some advantages over spring planting by utilizing a portion of the growing season in open ground after small grain harvest, or following sorghum-sudan, or early corn silage harvest. With adequate fall establishment, the new stand can begin its growth on schedule the following spring, ready to go into full production.

TIPS for LATE SUMMER ALFALFA ESTABLISHMENT

- Apply lime, P & K according to soil test; there is no point in starting out in the negative column on soil fertility.
- If applying manure prior to planting, manage manure application so that seed placement is not in direct contact with manure. Dissolved salts in manure can impede germination and early growth if dry soil conditions lead to concentrations of dissolved salts close to seed.
- Check the moisture status of your soil profile. Make sure there is enough soil moisture below planting depth, to keep seedlings growing after emergence.



- Avoid planting into a bone-dry soil profile unless you can irrigate to get young plants established.
- Even with sufficient soil moisture at rooting depth, you might be planting into dry surface soil. This can lead to uneven emergence unless a timely irrigation or rain follows within a reasonable period.
- Make sure to obtain good seed-to-soil contact for improved soil moisture intake during germination.
- No-till planting has the edge on soil moisture conservation instead of tillage for seedbed preparation.
- If planting via no-till, take advantage of the option for a burn-down herbicide before planting to control existing weeds.
- Try to plant at least 6 weeks before a killing freeze. Shorter time-frames have increasing risk of poor winter survival.
- Refrain from taking a fall cutting even if the new stand appears to have adequate growth. Young plants are forming taproots and storing up carbohydrates, and will need that energy for winter survival and initiation of robust spring growth.
- Weed pressure is generally less than spring planting and weeds may present fewer problems with late summer establishment.
- Even so, follow herbicide label recommendations to obtain best control and scout fields soon after emergence for any problem weed escapes.



These alfalfa plants are showing good crown development and early spring growth, following late summer planting the prior year. The crowns of these young plants are already developed well enough to exert four to six crown buds per plant, and put forth multiple stems per plant for good contribution to first-cut yield. Assuming you want at least 55 stems per square foot in order to avoid constraining yield potential, young plants of this stature would require at least 12-15 plants per square foot.