



Extend Alfalfa Stands With a Grass Interseeding

After a few years of growth and cutting, alfalfa fields start to thin from age, winter injury, and disease and weed pressure, and some revitalization of the stand is necessary to keep it in economical production. You may not be ready to terminate the field fully and rotate into a new crop, so this natural decline of the stand can often be remedied by interseeding a perennial or annual grass. Thickening the stand with grass helps fill in bare spots and suppress weeds and boosts yields more than most legumes would. The diversity grass adds to the stand is quite beneficial in a variety of ways. Grass tolerates different conditions than alfalfa, so it makes up for any yield drag straight alfalfa might experience in wet or cooler conditions. It can fill in low spots that may be wetter, as well as prevent erosion. Grasses help extend the harvest window at the beginning and end of the season (as well as the summer slump, when a summer annual is interseeded), when alfalfa may not be as productive.

Grass and alfalfa mixes often have both higher yield and quality than straight alfalfa. Agronomically, the diversity grass contributes makes good sense, because diverse stands perform better than monocultures over time. Less weed and pest control is needed (which means fewer plant-back restrictions from herbicides), and as a component in a hay mixture, it helps provide faster drydown, as well as improving yields overall. Nutritionally, grass and alfalfa combined create a more palatable forage. Grasses cut just before heading add a quality component high in effective fiber that helps slow the rate of passage of the richer alfalfa hay, which increases utilization.

When is Interseeding economical?

At a certain point the decline of the alfalfa stand, it makes productive and economic sense to either rotate to a new crop or rejuvenate it with interseeding. How to make this decision? If there are fewer than 40 stems (not plants or crowns) it makes sense to make improvements to the stand.

Interseeding Perennials

After a short grazing or cutting in late summer, no-till drill a grass, grass mixture, or grass-legume mixture (after taking soil samples and adjusting fertility). Late summer is the ideal time because the alfalfa regrows more slowly and won't be as competitive with the new seeding. The weed pressure in a thinning stand may require some control before planting as well.

Available moisture and competition will be the major limitations.

The following spring, if the new grasses seem weak, an early cutting can help open up the canopy and allow them to fill out more.

What to interseed (cut back normal seeding rate by about half):

- Orchardgrass – when extending the life of the stand for several years is desired
- Tall fescue
- Meadow fescue
- Festulolium
- Perennial ryegrass
- Grass mixes, such as these King's mixtures
 - Tristar: 40% Kora and STF43 Tall Fescues, 34% Perseus Festulolium, 26% Premium Orchardgrass
 - Greenfast: 37% Perseus Festulolium, 27% Niva Orchardgrass, 22% Premium Perennial Ryegrass, 9% Freedom! MR Red Clover, 4% Barblanca Clover