

Select Alfalfa Products for Your Needs & Remembering the Basics

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Selecting an alfalfa product can sometimes be as easy as stopping at your favorite seed store and picking up whatever is available, but for those who really want to select the correct product for their selected fields, geography, management practices, and animal needs; it takes a little more research. Alfalfa products can offer a high value of nutritional feed for your farms, but selecting the right product for your operation is important as well as understanding the management of growing this crop. My logic has always been that producing good alfalfa involves 30% seed selection and 70% management, but that 30% is really important. So what should you consider when you select an alfalfa product? A lot of it goes back to the basics.

Fall Dormancy Ratings

- This determines when the alfalfa quits growing in the fall of the year and when it starts growing in the spring, so this has been a determining factor for growers who live in colder climates. The higher the Fall Dormancy rating the higher the potential yield. Data shows that more growers are selecting higher Fall Dormancy products and managing them for higher yield potentials due to newer products and better winter hardiness ratings.

Winter Hardiness & Persistence Ratings

- This is often confused with Fall Dormancy, but determines the stand longevity and how the product withstands the winter temperatures. This should be considered especially in northern geographies, but also can be managed with proper nutrients, timing of cuttings, and other management.

Alfalfa Yield Potential

- This is still the primary focus to consider when planting alfalfa. Select products with high yield potentials, higher dormancy ratings, faster regrowth, and strong agronomics for best results.

Alfalfa Quality Ratings

- Harvest alfalfa earlier at the mid to late vegetative stage (before or at bloom) for higher quality forage, while harvesting the crop late after additional growth can enhance your yields.
- Alfalfa quality is more management than product selection, so when selecting a product ask your agronomist or seed representative how to obtain higher quality cuttings.

Alfalfa Disease Ratings

- Alfalfa products typically have a 30 DRI (Disease Rating Index) although some brands have expanded this rating to a 35 DRI, which can include some additional diseases and insects, but may not be as prevalent in all geographies. Some newer varieties have an HR rating for Aphanomyces Race 2 which is becoming more prevalent in the Upper Midwest. Based on diseases in your area and field selection, consider products with a higher DRI rating to get the best disease tolerance.

Field Selection including Soil & pH

- Most soils are acceptable for planting alfalfa as long as they are well drained but still have a good water holding capacity. The most ideal pH levels for growing alfalfa would be from 6.8-7.2.
- Soil tests can help determine pH, cation exchange capacity (CEC) as well as nutrient levels.
- To help enhance your alfalfa crop make sure your soil fertility program includes a high level of potassium.
- Inoculating your alfalfa ensures good root nodulation by the rhizobium, provides adequate nitrogen fixation, enhances the crop's root system and improves plant growth.

Weed Management

- Managing weeds is crucial to a good alfalfa stand and longevity. Using herbicide tolerant alfalfa products such as Genuity® Roundup Ready® Alfalfa products can help manage weeds.

Planting & Harvest Management

- Plant as shallow as possible in a firm weed free soil for best seed to soil contact and emergence.
- Plant at rates appropriate to your area and conditions, but 15-25 lbs of seed per acre is recommended for your best soils, while 8-18 lbs is for lighter or sandy soils. If planting into irrigation, use 20-25 lbs per acre for best potential results.
- Nutrients are still needed even with a legume product such as alfalfa. Potash is the most crucial nutrient needed at rates of 300+ pounds per acre. Review your soil test for best recommended requirements and consider testing your soils every year and reapplying fertilizer based on those recommendations.
- Due to autotoxicity concerns, do not plant new alfalfa seed into existing stands of alfalfa, unless the stand is less than 6 months old.

These are just a few recommendations when selecting an alfalfa product for this coming year's planting. Alfalfa should be treated like a cash crop and managed the same. Alfalfa can be a high nutritional valued feed, but also can be used for sale. Ask questions before selecting a product. Basics to consider include ensuring the product offers the best options for your geography, has strong yield potential, and the appropriate agronomic package to meet your needs.