



Preparing Grass Stands for Winter by Chad Hale

If you have been to a Byron Seed meeting lately, you know that we put a lot of emphasis on fall management of grasses. Although the title of this article is about winter, preparation for winter really begins in the late summer with grasses. Many times when we think our grass stand 'winter killed' the damage was really done in the summer.

The typical grasses we grow in the Midwest are Cool Season grasses, which grow best below about 80 degrees. As the temperature climbs above 80, the plants spend all their energy on respiration and very little energy is left for growth. As I write this, the forecast looks to be hot and dry for an extended period this summer. That will be very hard on our grasses. So what can you do to help ensure good grass stands for the future?

Jerome Magnusen of DLF International Seeds offers these suggestions:

1. Keep an eye on fertility as you progress through the summer. By late August or early September, the plant will shift considerable resources to growing roots and P and K must be available for root growth. Enough Nitrogen needs to be available to fuel the process
2. Leave more residue in the summer. Raising cutter bars or changing stocking rates or rotation lengths may be necessary to leave enough residue to fuel regrowth once temperatures cool and soil moisture returns. With most grasses at least 3.5 inches of residual height is needed for maximum growth.
3. Remember that the health status of the plant in early fall determines next year's growth potential. The number of tillers for next spring is set by the end of September. A weakened plant then will give you open stands and reduced yield the following year.

As we think about how to implement the things Jerome talks about, it becomes clear that the right decisions may not be easy to make. If the summer drought doesn't ease up soon, forage yields are going to suffer this fall and the temptation to scalp stands down to the dirt will be very hard to resist as hay/silage stocks decline and cows are short of pasture heading into fall. As much as it goes against the grain, feeding hay to animals on pasture in late August can pay huge benefits in forage production later in the fall and into the next spring. Raising the cutter bars an inch or even forgoing one forage harvest can mean the difference in stand survival.

Evaluate stands in late August to estimate the production later into the fall and next spring. There should be an abundance of leaves at the base of the plants that are starting to grow. Some buds should have broken dormancy at or near ground level and white roots should be starting to appear in the top 6 inches of soil. Stands that are not bouncing back from the drought may need to be over-seeded in the fall to maintain good yields next spring. For grazing or silage, Italian ryegrass or festulolium is a great choice for over-seeding thin stands. Tall fescue or orchardgrass can be no-tilled into thin hay fields, but be aware that these two species need lots of open ground to get established. Each fescue or orchardgrass seedling needs a few square inches of bare dirt in order to get established. A solid stand of dormant grass is not a



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good candidate for fescue or orchardgrass over-seeding because when those stands break dormancy the new seedlings will probably not survive. If you have good ground cover, your best bet is to concentrate on fertility and adequate residual height and wait for fall rains.