



The Advantages of Fall Seeding by Ernest Weaver

Both early spring and late summer are viable times to seed alfalfa and grass. In this article I will examine the reasons that I prefer to do my seeding in the late summer.

- Already have production out of the field I will be seeding
- Completion from weeds is much less in the fall
- Soil conditions may be much more favorable in the fall
- I can use self-terminating nurse crops in the fall

The first reason I like August seeding is that by the time I'm planting my new seeding, I've already taken a crop of some kind off the field I'm planting. In the seeding year, there's generally, a lag in the production of the new crop — which often drives the heavy use of a nurse crop to boost seeding year yields. But the downside of this approach is that heavy use of a nurse crop can have a negative effect on the new seeding. If, however, I've already harvested a crop from each acre I'm planting, I'm much more likely to be patient and go with straight seeding in the fall.

Another reason I like late summer seeding is that the competition from weeds is less in the fall than in the spring. Certainly, there's still weed pressure in the fall, but it tends to be less aggressive. So, in the fall, thick, well-planted new crops can often outgrow the weeds.

In addition, the soil conditions are generally more favorable for preparing a seed bed than in the spring. Unlike wetter spring soils, late summer and early fall soils lend themselves to beautiful seed bed preparation.

To be fair, the dryer climate is also my first major concern with late summer seeding, because some moisture is needed for seedlings to germinate and survive a September heat wave. So, if your late summer and early fall plantings show signs of severe drought, you'd better hold off on seeding new hay fields or pasture and perhaps switch to annuals if plantings drag out into late fall.

Finally, late summer seeding allows me to use self-terminating nurse crops — my favorite being teffgrass.

Teffgrass as a Nurse Crop

Here's an example to show the benefits of using only two pounds of teffgrass. Say it's the middle of August and you're planting 15 pounds of alfalfa and 10 pounds of grass to the acre. If you blend in just two pounds of teffgrass with your cool-season seeds, you'll have a wildly aggressive nurse crop that will stop growing about four weeks after it started and be dead in six weeks — but not before giving you a burst of soil-holding root mass that will form while your cool season plants are dawdling to get established.

I've used this practice to develop fescue waterways that would have otherwise been very difficult to establish. In fact, four to five weeks after planting one such waterway received a four-inch rain but had no ditches washed in it. Oats, too, can be self-terminating, but much later. Remember, oats will grow long after frost. So, hold planting rates of oats at 20 pounds or less, because you don't want the oats to terminate the new seeding by smothering it out.

Be sure to run my ideas by your local dealer, who is the expert in your area. Also, work with your local dealer to establish the best planting dates for your climate and conditions.

Happy fall seeding! And be sure to try a little teffgrass!