

## Tips for Successful Summer Seeding

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Early spring is the best time to seed forages as the risk of inadequate moisture is much lower than for summer seeding. But circumstances may make summer seeding an attractive option. Most of the prairies have more than enough moisture in the soil to make summer seeding an ideal option if the land couldn't be worked in the spring due to flooding. Seeding now will allow this year to still be an establishment year and not a complete write-off.

### When is the Best Time for Summer Seeding of Forages?

Most species establish very well with summer seeding, remember that grasses don't need nearly as much growth time to provide good winter survival as alfalfas, but trefoil and reed canarygrass are slower to establish and are not well suited to this application. Specifically, alfalfas need at least six weeks of growth after germination and before a killing frost. This means that the last week of July and the first two weeks of August are the ideal time for summer seeding. Moisture conditions are more favourable this year for faster growth of grasses and alfalfa.

Seeding within the next week or so is critical!

### Tips for Summer Seeding...

Adjust fertility as necessary, scout the field and control perennial weeds and volunteer grain if required. Ideal pH for alfalfa is 6.8. A ton of alfalfa removes 55 lbs potassium and 12 lbs phosphate (65 and 15.5 kg/ha, respectively) and you may need to add P & K depending on your soil test results. If seeding forage after a grain crop, volunteer grain can be a serious problem and compete excessively with the forage. Make sure to control this threat with good timing, herbicide or deep ploughing. Winter annuals can be a problem (shepherd's purse, pennycress for example) so it may be necessary to spray with a low rate of 2,4-DB and MCPA to get control of weeds.

Prepare the seed bed for shallow seeding and roll before seeding if necessary to ensure a firm seedbed where you can seed ideally at ¼ - ½ inch depth. At this time of year you are not trying to seed down into moisture, but rather you are placing the seed in the soil and waiting for the rain to come to the seed. Normal rainfall during August and September is adequate for good establishment, but it is best to seed when the forecast indicates rain. It's a good idea to calibrate your seeder. Different seed lots will differ in seed size and actual planted seed can vary substantially with the same seeder setting for different seed lots.

No-till seeding is an excellent way to go for summer seeding as it conserves moisture and the seedbed will be firm. Loose seedbeds dry out quickly.

Choose a good variety – newer alfalfa varieties yield better, persist better, have better disease resistance and the best are also improved forage quality types and the same can be said about the various grasses. The cost of seed is still one of the smallest costs you incur when growing forage so it's wise to invest in a good variety.

Do not use a cover (or nurse) crop and do use Certified seed – it is the only guarantee of seed quality (germination, freedom from weeds, genetic purity). Common seed is an unknown – it may not have persistence or yield performance; it may provide reasonable performance one year and very poor performance the next. Cover crops compete with the establishing forage and result in lower stand counts and lower vigour.

### If Attempting to Summer Seed Alfalfa...

Seed at least 14 lb/acre (15.5 kg/ha) of alfalfa to ensure 35 plants per square foot (380 plants per square metre) in the first production year. This is a general recommendation but local conditions will dictate your seeding rate, so consult with your sales agent. Higher seeding rates could be advisable and may reduce the risk of a poor stand. Drilling Phosphorus at seeding will get plants growing quickly and help root development.

Check herbicide history in the field you're seeding so as not to have problems with residual herbicide action. It's wiser not to seed into and old alfalfa field because of autotoxicity – the field needs to be out of alfalfa for one year before you seed alfalfa again.

### Final Thoughts on Summer Seeding...

Do not harvest the fall seeding until the following spring unless you have to clip to limit weed competition. You want plenty of root growth and reserves to survive the winter. This means that your weed control program needs to be good if you are to avoid clipping.

Remember there are risks to summer seeding but the results can be great – especially in such a wet year that many growers in the prairies have experienced. In these conditions the crops germinate fast and according to Pickseed staff grass growth occurs within a week.