

Alfalfa at risk for winter damage



Field Notes

By Bill Pardee

HOW did your alfalfa weather this “yo-yo” winter? You’ll soon be able to tell, as snow disappears and plants green up. And, you’ll really need to know ASAP to help adjust your spring-planting plans.

The record cold snaps and long mild spells can hurt overwintering alfalfa. I checked alfalfa fields during a spring-like week in January — in New York state! I found crown buds growing, with many green leaves.

Normally, that’s too early for plants to break dormancy. Freezes should surely follow, killing such plants. But who knows this year? In any case, it’s worth an early look.

Frost heaving may be a problem if freeze-thaw conditions persist. If you see heaving, dig some plants to see if the tap root is broken. Plants with broken tap roots can start growing, but they’ll do poorly and will soon die.

Plants heaved more than 1 inch may survive, but won’t be high producers. Slightly heaved plants can survive, and given time, may reseal themselves.

A good 6-inch snowfall in mid-March would provide protection for spring’s eventual freezing and thawing. Snowfalls are tough to arrange, though.

Even without winter damage, checking older alfalfa stands can also pay. Disease, insects and poor drainage are plant killers. It’s better to find out early, while you have time to adjust.

How to score stands

Rate alfalfa fields as soon as plants start growing. Check early for large, healthy crowns with many stems starting.

■ **Count your crowns:** Look for five or more strong crowns per square foot in clear alfalfa, three to four crowns in an alfalfa-grass mixture. Check several places in each field. With that many plants, your fields are “good to go.”

■ **Check root health:** Dig several

Key Points

- Winter’s warm, cold weather may have set alfalfa up for major damage.
- Rate stands as soon as plants start stirring to consider early-spring options.
- Do not reseed alfalfa back into old or thin alfalfa stands.

plants and split roots lengthwise. Healthy roots have a white or creamy color inside. They’ll be firm and resist peeling when scratched with your thumbnail. Dying roots are discolored and have a spongy texture.

■ **Count stems:** This is a good way to rate stands when growth is 4 to 6 inches tall. Wisconsin forage agronomists suggest 55 stems per square foot as your target in clear alfalfa and recommend replacing stands with less than 40 stems.

Indiana researchers say 40 stems can be plenty, as long as they’re strong and well-fertilized. In grass mixtures, you can go with 20 to 30 vigorous alfalfa stems, so long as the grass is strong.

■ **Make a standwide assessment:** Check several places in each field. Stand counts vary across the field, depending on drainage, fertility and soil type.

Maybe two-thirds of the field looks good. But how about that stretch back behind the knoll? If thin patches are big enough, consider treating them separately.

When alfalfa’s too thin ...

If a stand is too thin, your “what-to-do” decision may depend on how much winterkill you’ve had, how much grass is present, age of stand and how much feed you’ll need. If it’s really bad or old, you could plow or just kill the remaining stand and plant corn. This may be your best strategy, if it doesn’t mess up your rotation or shift your desired balance between alfalfa and corn. It’ll cost more than other choices, but may produce more feed.

Or, thicken up the stand via three



WEATHER DAMAGE: Midwinter alfalfa green-up can seriously injure stands if followed by a hard freeze.

options — all of which require action in very early spring for best results:

■ If the grass looks good, you can treat the field as a grass stand. Apply nitrogen early to boost grass growth and quality. Harvest it once grass heads are in the boot stage.

■ If you prefer legume hay, try overseeding with red clover to thicken your stands. That’ll stretch production for another year or two. You’ll get best results with a sod-seeder, although a

drill can work.

■ Frost seeding is possible. But do it early, while soils are still freezing and thawing as winter recedes. Use red clover; its seedlings are frost tolerant.

Do not reseed alfalfa back into thinned alfalfa stands. Existing plants secrete toxin into the soil, which kill new alfalfa sprouts.

Pardee, a retired Cornell Extension agronomist, has written for American Agriculturist for 36 years.



Buy federal crop insurance before deadline hits

By JOHN OTTE

FROM Maryland and Delaware and north through Maine, producers of 22 spring-planted crops have until March 15 to sign up for federally subsidized crop insurance. This is also the deadline to make any changes to existing policies, says Jan Eliassen, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Risk Management Agency.

If you’re wondering how international trade negotiations might affect

Key Points

- Buy subsidized crop insurance for spring-planted crops before March 15.
- International trade rules put most crop insurance subsidies in the “green box.”
- Check with your crop insurance agent for insurance details.

government programs, one thing seems clear, according to Eliassen. Crop insurance subsidies are nearly completely in the “green box,” protected from what-

ever the results of international agreements.

What’s insurable in the Northeast

The 22 insurable Northeastern crops which share the March 15 deadline are: corn, fresh sweet corn, potatoes, cigar-binder tobacco, cigar-wrapper tobacco, sweet corn, canning beans, grain sorghum, green peas, soybeans, tomatoes, wheat, oats, forage seeding, barley, fresh-market tomatoes, Maryland tobacco, beans, hybrid seed corn, cabbage, potatoes and cigar-filler tobacco.

Not every crop is insurable in every state or every county within a state. For instance, there are 16 insurable crops in Pennsylvania and three in Rhode Island.

To sign up for crop insurance or to make changes to existing policies, contact a local crop insurance agent before the March 15 deadline. If you haven’t carried coverage, start investigating it at your earliest convenience. Start by contacting your nearest Farm Service Agency office for a list of crop insurance agents.