

David Hallauer
District Extension Agent, Crops & Soils

Fall Alfalfa Management Thoughts...

The investment we put *into* alfalfa means we want to get a lot back *out* of it as well. Maximizing production requires a lot of management, and that management doesn't stop until the growing season stops, with fall being an important management window.

When planning the last cutting, base it on end of season weather and growing conditions making the last cutting based on expected crown regrowth rather than one-tenth bloom. Ideally, the last cutting would be made to allow for eight to 12 inches of foliage regrowth or four to six weeks of growth time before the first killing frost (alfalfa will quit growing after the first hard freeze of below 26 degrees F) to allow adequate time for replenishment of root reserves. Assuming a mid-October freeze, harvest in early September to allow adequate recovery.

What happens if we have an inadequate recovery time frame? Alfalfa plants are right now storing carbohydrates to survive the winter. If root reserves are *not* adequately replenished before the first killing freeze in fall, the stand becomes more susceptible to winter damage potentially resulting in slower green-up/early growth next spring – even stand loss in severe cases. Good root reserves in the fall mean greater yield and quality next season.

Fall is a great time for soil sampling alfalfa stands as well. Test for pH, phosphorus, and potassium at a minimum, but consider sulfur and boron as well. Test to a depth of six inches (24 inches for sulfur). Contact any District Office for soil testing supplies/procedures.

We started the year fighting alfalfa weevil, and some stands are ending the year with fall armyworm pressure. Stands should be scouted, particularly following harvest, for fall armyworm feeding. In many cases, a stand will tolerate some feeding. If pressure is high, control efforts may be in order, so the stand goes into fall in good health rather than struggling to survive. If you have questions about fall armyworm scouting, drop me a line. One to two caterpillars per square foot can destroy seedling alfalfa while 10-15 per square foot can destroy foot tall plants.

Ross Mosteller
District Extension Agent, Livestock & Natural Resources

Time to Retire the Sire?

The Shorthorn herd bulls northwest of Bern have been pulled off the spring calving cows and they now stand across the fence bellowing at each other, trying to see who is the dominate male. I've tried running bulls together in the past, but always fear that in the fight for dominance, injury will occur. It's crossed my mind that it would simply be easier to sell these vocalizing, testosterone pumping, facility destroyers and replace them with new bulls each year, but is that logical? Often a lot of time, research and money goes into buying a herd bull, so it only makes sense that the desire is to maximize the bull investment, but there are good reasons to retire sires after the breeding season.

The physical demand placed on bulls to service the cow herd generally allows them to have a useful life somewhere around five years after reaching full service capacity. Yes, those seven plus year-old bulls can still be breeders, but the work load they are asked to accomplish can take a toll. Mounting and breeding cows in all sorts of terrain, working in mud, sand, rocks, snow, potentially fighting with other bulls and the natural service of each female could lead to injury of feet, legs and sex organs. Over time, even the soundest and most athletic bulls are going get injured, become difficult or unsafe to have around and this may lead to potentially failing a breeding soundness exam.

In addition to the physical soundness of the bull, there is also the genetic potential to evaluate as well. As a sire's progeny come into production, true genetic merit is often best realized. This might be measured in weaning weights, carcass traits or material abilities of daughters. It takes years to be fully expressed, so if the physical aspects allow, most bulls persist in the herd for several seasons to be progeny tested. However, as a result of successful selection programs in the purebred seedstock industry, younger bulls purchased as yearlings next spring will very likely will have a genetic advantage over older bulls, as nearly every breed has evidence of improving genetic trends in their populations. The balancing act becomes using proven accuracy versus potential performance enhancement.

Bulls in a spring calving cow herd are currently "off-duty" for the next 6-8 months. If a bull weighs 2,000 pounds and eats 2.5% of his body weight in forage dry matter hay each day, that is a daily intake of 50 pounds. For the sake of simple math, let's use 200 days for the bull to be eating hay without working. He will consume about 5 ton of forage dry matter. If his nutritional requirements will be met with hay valued at \$120/ton that is \$600 in feed cost occurred between now and turn-out next spring. The other real cost involved in this discussion, is the salvage value of the bull. The current USDA Market Report for Kansas this week indicates a salvage value of approximately \$1.55 per pound for average quality bulls or roughly \$3,100 for the 2,000-pound bull used in this example.

Assess the genetic merit, physical condition and ages of existing herd bulls; along with current feed costs. Culling older or lower performing herd bulls now and re-populating with young bulls next spring can add long-term genetic advantages beyond just the savings realized in winter feed bills. The salvage value plus the savings in feed cost should cover a sizable portion (*\$3,700 in our example*) of investing in younger, likely genetically superior bulls in the spring. All of this needs to be considered as you evaluate keeping a bull another year. If the operation utilizes multiple breeding seasons, bulls might have more opportunity to be better utilized changing the math a bit, but the prior exercise still has utility at any time.

Laura Phillips
District Extension Agent, Horticulture

Fall Garden Checklist

As autumn creeps closer we need to start preparing our gardens for our next growing season. While it might seem like garden work is done for the season, giving your garden extra TLC now can have big impacts on its productivity next summer. Here are some steps to take to boost your next growing season:

1. **Map your current garden:** If you haven't already, map out where your annuals are. When spring comes, you will want to refer back to this map to ensure you are rotating your plants to curb disease that may overwinter in the soil. Ideally, you should not put plants from the same family in the same location.
2. **Do a soil test and amendments:** If you have not done a soil test in the past couple years, it might be a good time to see where your soil is at. If you need to adjust the pH, doing it now will give your soil pH time to adjust.
3. **Split up perennial flowers:** Our spring-blooming perennials can be divided up in September and early October. You want them back in the ground well before the frost hits so their roots can re-establish before the winter. You can divide lilies, peonies, and irises. Make sure to look up how frequently can be divided, as not all plants can be divided each year.
4. **Clear out the weeds:** Do one last round of weeding, and make sure to get those weeds that have gone to seed. This will help lower the number of weeds you need to deal with next spring.
5. **Clear out debris:** Remove debris from plants with disease or insect issues. Diseases and insects can overwinter in debris from infected plants. Rather than compost diseased or infected material, either add it to a burn pile or disposed of it in the trash.
6. **Take care of the leaves:** If you have leaves on your lawn, rather than rake them, go over them with a mower a couple of times. This will prevent them from smothering the lawn but help provide nutrients for the soil and material for birds to nest with.
7. **If you are going to plant a cover crop:** Remove other plant debris from your garden and rake out the soil to prepare it.
8. **If you are *not* planting cover crops:** You can leave dead plant material in your garden until you plant next year, as will provide food and habitat for native pollinators, birds, and wildlife throughout the winter and early spring.
9. **Mulch tender plants:** After plants lose their foliage in late October, apply mulch to tender perennials and perennials planted in late fall. A layer of 4-6 inches of mulch will help prevent frost injury during the winter. These protective layers of mulch should be removed in early spring so that the plants can pop back up. Be sure to not apply mulch prematurely – if the plant is not yet dormant, the added insulation can post-pone their dormancy phase and cause more frost damage.

If you have questions on any of these steps or how to care for your garden, please reach out to our office for assistance.

September 6, 2024

Teresa Hatfield
District Extension Agent, Family and Community Wellness

No news article this week.

September 6, 2024

Cindy Williams
District Extension Agent, Food, Nutrition, Health and Safety

No news article this week.