

Fall Harvesting of Alfalfa

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I would wager that there isn't an alfalfa grower who hasn't contemplated whether or not they should make one last harvest in the fall of the year. If there appears to be a considerable amount of forage in the field, this decision might be even more tempting. However, we have to remember that a late fall harvest before a "killing frost" will add extra stress to alfalfa plants and increase the risk of a weak or thin stand the following spring.

A less risky option may be to take a final harvest after a "killing frost". But, knowing when frost has stopped alfalfa growth is tricky at best. A critical factor to plant survival is that you don't want a warming period after harvesting following frost that will cause the alfalfa to begin growing again. Here are some things to consider when deciding whether or not to take a fall alfalfa harvest.

*Age of Stand: Older alfalfa stands are more likely to winter kill or suffer winter injury following a fall harvest than a younger alfalfa stand.

*Variety: Alfalfa varieties with moderate resistance to several diseases and with sufficient winter-hardiness have greater tolerance to stress from fall harvesting than less disease resistant or less winter-hardy varieties.

*Soil pH and Fertility: Adequate soil pH and fertility minimizes the risk of fall harvesting by allowing alfalfa plants to develop properly and be healthier.

*Harvest Frequency: Alfalfa harvest schedules which do not allow the alfalfa plant to flower once during the growing season, makes the plant more susceptible to winter injury.

*Dry Conditions in August: Dry weather, especially in August, causes alfalfa to store excess root energy reserves making it more winter-hardy.

*Fall Cutting Height: Leaving six (6) to eight (8) inches of stubble when taking a fall harvest will reduce the risk of winter injury.

Adapted from an article by Marvin Hall, College of Agricultural Sciences, Penn State Extension