

FLOOD IRRIGATING UP ALFALFA IN THE EARLY FALL

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Last year Carl Schoner showed how he was able to realize a considerable profit from sprinkling up alfalfa in the early fall rather than waiting for the winter rains to bring it up. I would like to show you how we in Stanislaus County can do the same thing without the expense of renting sprinklers. If I waited for the rains to bring up new hay I would have to sacrifice 2 to 3 tons of hay the first year. By planting in the fall and flood irrigating up, my first year hay yields are just about the same as my second year hay yields.

In our area we have been successfully flooding up alfalfa for at least 25 years. Most of our ground is sandy loam. I do not think this practice would work very well on heavier soils. We like to have ground that will allow us to get the water on and off without standing for more than about 2 to 3 hours.

The most important requirement for flooding up hay is land that is absolutely level. High spots will not get wet and low spots will drown out. I consider it essential to laser plane every piece of ground that I put into alfalfa. Our soils compact easily which makes a good ripping job a must. We like to rip 24 to 36 inches deep in three different directions. After we rip we come back in with a disc and land plane. Then we springtooth and ringroll. The springtooth fluffs up the seedbed and the ringroll packs it down.

There are several planting methods common in our area. Some people drill in the seed and others broadcast. I prefer to make a fluffy seedbed with a springtooth followed by a ringroll then fly the seed on at 30 pounds per acre and put the water on the same day. Some of the seed floats, however, it does not seem to hurt the stand. Other people prefer to ringroll or lightly harrow the seed in after it is flown on or broadcast.

We use about 15 cfs which will irrigate about three acres per hour. I run Eptam in the first irrigation water to control weeds. However, some people prefer to disc the Eptam in. If there are high spots and you are water running Eptam, they will turn into weed spots after the second irrigation. After the seed is planted we irrigate immediately. It is not necessary to pre-irrigate. On the first irrigation the water can stand up to about 24 hours without hurting the germinating seed.

Depending on the temperature, seedlings will emerge in 3 to 10 days. In warm weather a 4-week-old stand should look like a dichondra lawn. The second irrigation should come from 10 days to 3 weeks after the first irrigation. The water must not cover the plants for more than about 4 hours. This is not too difficult if you have done a good job of ripping and watch your water closely. It helps to have some way of draining off excess water. I try to time my irrigations so the water does not have a chance to stand on the field during the hot part of the day and heat up which seems to cook the plants.

In our area if we plant early enough we can get the second irrigation on before the irrigation district pulls the water out of the system. The roots are down enough by then to carry the plant over until the winter rains start. In the spring we make the first cutting on the new hay at about the same time as our other hay.