

Alfalfa and Dandelions

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At this time of year as we move closer to the first cut of alfalfa, dandelions can ruin the look of any hay field. When you see those yellow flowers you start to look for some method of controlling this weed. Generally dandelions in an alfalfa field are an indication of other problems.



Before we look at controlling dandelions remember weeds do have some feed value, this value differs among species. Dandelions come close to equaling alfalfa in protein and total digestible nutrients (TDN). Control of dandelion may not necessarily improve the quality of hay, but it may be of some value in reducing the time necessary to dry the hay, since dandelion dries more slowly than alfalfa. Increased drying time may mean greater harvest losses due to untimely rainfall. Although the presence of dandelions can result in wet and moldy spots in hay bales decreasing the forage quality and perhaps crude protein when harvested as silage, it does not significantly reduce the feeding value of the crop. Producers that harvest alfalfa fields with numerous dandelions can still feed livestock with few concerns. However, have your hay bales tested for quality to get a more accurate idea of the conditions within your production fields.

Dandelion invasion of alfalfa does not cause thinning of established stands.

Stands are thinned by other factors such as winter-kill, leaving areas in a field where dandelions can establish. Thus, it is important to maintain a vigorous stand through proper fertilization, cutting, and other control measures. For dandelions it is important to control them prior to the establishment of a forage stand. Their broad leaves will cover the ground and won't let forage seedlings gain strength and good vigor during the first part of the growing season. Controlling dandelions prior to establishing an alfalfa field and getting a good establishment is the first step to maintaining a healthy field.

With dandelions, as with most other weeds, the important part of controlling them is assuring that you have a healthy field to begin with. When the stand starts to reach the end of its useful life or in the event of a disturbance in the field, dandelions and other

weeds will move in. Stem density should be one major aspect to determine overall alfalfa production.

- A stem density of 50 stems of alfalfa per square foot or below indicates a low yielding field and a weaker stand. Considerations for rotation should be made.
- A stem density of 55 stems of alfalfa per square foot or higher indicates a high yielding field with a good stand and vigor. Considerations for rotation are not needed at this time.

Keeping your alfalfa stand healthy by good forage management will go a long way towards controlling weed problems. Before using a herbicide in established stands, evaluate the forage to ensure it is worth the cost of the herbicide.

Here are some general rules to follow before using an herbicide in established forage stands:

1. Thin or irregular stands will not thicken once weeds are removed. Be sure there are sufficient desirable species to fill in the gaps. A minimum of five alfalfa plants per square foot should be present.
2. Weeds tolerant of the herbicide may invade the space left by susceptible species, ultimately creating a more severe weed problem.
3. Only well-established vigorous stands should be treated with herbicides and these stands likely don't have a weed problem.
4. If the forage stand is at least two years old and 25% to 30% are weeds, removing them with an herbicide application is of questionable value.
5. If 50% or greater of the stand are weeds, it is time to rotate to a different crop.

Spring is not the time to consider control of dandelions. In the fall there are some chemicals that will give fair but not complete control. Spraying may be considered if the field is in an area where it is very tough to establish a new stand of alfalfa. It is likely that spraying will need to be repeated annually in order to get the dandelions under control. For chemical options see the [Guide to Field Crop Protection](#).

For more information:

<http://igrow.org/agronomy/other-crops/alfalfa-dandelions-is-there-anything-we-can-do/>

http://www.forages.psu.edu/topics/species_variety_trials/species/alfalfa/weeds.html