Getting Started With Alfalfa

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THE CONNECTING LINK

BIGGER AND BETTER CROPS

MORE AND BETTER LIVE STOCK

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Distributed by

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"Good morning, Sam. How are you? Just the man I wanted to see. How's your alfalfa doing out there?"

It was the local cashier of a bank in one of southern Wisconsin's prosperous country towns who spoke. Sam was a farmer. Not a big farmer but a good "awake-to-new-ideas" farmer. He owned 160 acres—most of it paid for.

"Oh, my alfalfa is doing fine," replied Sam. "I've got 30 acres now and it keeps me humping to keep up with it. It does beat all how that stuff grows when it gets plenty of rain. If we have a good summer I'll get four or five tons to the acre. I can't see why more of our farmers don't get into the alfalfa business."

SUCCESS DOESN'T COME FROM LUCK.

"I have often thought about that myself," continued the banker. "You are the largest grower in this section and the most successful. Many others have tried it and most of them failed—costly failures, too. When I tell those fellows about your success they say it's all luck. How about it? Why do you have such good alfalfa luck?"

Sam had a broad smile on his face.

"I tried that luck way of growing alfalfa and it's the most expensive thing I ever did. Five years ago I seeded my first alfalfa. Wanted to grow a crop that would produce more feed and better feed than timothy. Well, like a fool, I put in ten acres right at the start. I seeded it with oats—just the way I did timothy. Didn't inoculate. Didn't lime. That was all humbug to me then. The next year I had the poorest ten acres of alfalfa you ever saw. It was patchy—yellow and sickly. It looked just the way I felt and I was plumb disgusted. I plowed it up in May and planted to corn. That failure cost me one hundred dollars and everybody knew about it. I agreed with my neighbors that alfalfa wasn't any crop for Wisconsin and I was through with it for good.

"But the next winter your bank put on that Pure Bred Seed Show. R. A. Moore came down from the College and did the judging and in the afternoon he talked on alfalfa. He talks right from the shoulder. He told us that if we didn't believe in putting lime on sour soils and if we didn't believe in inoculation we had better not try to grow alfalfa at all. He said we would have better luck with timothy.

LIME SWEETENS SOUR SOIL.

"He showed us how easy it was to test the soil with litmus paper to see if it needed lime or he suggested we send an average
sample of the soil to the Experiment Station, Madison, and they would test it for us free of charge. That talk set me a-thinking. I began to realize that I had lots to learn about alfalfa and somehow or other Mr. Moore got me so interested that I really wanted to inoculate and lime and grow alfalfa right. So I joined the State Alfalfa Growers’ Association, the “Alfalfa Order”, and they sent me some litmus paper with instructions how to test my soil and other valuable information. I tried it on the ten acre field. The paper turned pink when put in contact with the soil. That meant lime. I couldn’t hardly believe that this field which would grow a 75 bushel crop of corn would be too acid for alfalfa.

“To make sure I sent a cigar box full taken from the surface of several parts of the field down to the Experiment Station. They tested it with the new Truog Test and wrote back that I would have to use two tons at least of fine dry lime. I got my neighbor interested and we bought a carload of the best grade of ground limestone. Marl, air-slacked lime, or waste lime would have been satisfactory also, but it just happened that we had a shorter haul and less freight with the ground limestone. I fall plowed my ten acres of corn stubble and put on the lime on top of the plowed ground late in the fall. I then disked it in. The next spring, I spread one load of sweet clover dirt over each acre for inoculation and seeded my alfalfa at the rate of 20 pounds to the acre with one bushel of barley as a nurse crop.

30 ACRES KEEPS US BUSY.

“Well, sir, I got a dandy stand. I have gotten on an average four tons to the acre from that field for the last three years. Alfalfa is one of the best producing and best paying crops I grow. It stands the drought, makes the soil rich, crowds out weeds—even Canada thistles haven’t a ghost of a show where alfalfa grows. Of course, I know that it keeps me busy to handle thirty acres. It means more work but look what I get for it. I hire extra help.”

“Yes I know, but a common complaint is that alfalfa winter-kills and they say the blue grass crowds it out. How about it?” asked the banker.

“That’s true enough,” replied Sam, “alfalfa winter-kills and blue grass comes in but don’t you know that it’s nearly always those fellows who pasture alfalfa after the third cutting or cut their alfalfa after the first week in September who complain the most. Some of us expect too much from our alfalfa. We get three crops off it and then we are not satisfied. We fall pasture it. Then the whole field winterkills and we get disgusted and blame the alfalfa. Maybe the field will just partly winterkill. Then for every dead alfalfa plant the blue grass takes its place and the more the alfalfa is thinned out by winterkilling the more rapidly blue grass keeps coming in. And so we naturally come to think that blue grass has crowded out the alfalfa when it
really just takes the place of dead alfalfa plants. I don't mind a little blue grass in my alfalfa but when the alfalfa has winter-killed so badly that half the field is blue grass the yields of hay get so poor that it's time to plow up or turn it into pasture. I intend to plow up my fields after they are four or five years old but last year I started putting my alfalfa in a regular five year rotation with two years of corn, one of barley, and two of alfalfa. Since I began liming and inoculating, it's just as easy for me to grow alfalfa as it is timothy and clover and you can readily see why alfalfa pays better.

IN LONG RUN BEST IS CHEAPEST.

"Oh, sometimes alfalfa with the best of care winterkills but in these years clover goes too. Three years ago I got ten pounds of Grimm alfalfa seed. That kind don't winterkill. It lives right through open winters that "raise Cain" with alfalfa from common Western grown seed. I was surprised at the difference in stand the last year. The Grimm was head and shoulders above the common. But it cost me 50 cents a pound and that's too much to pay for alfalfa seed. I expect that in a few years genuine variegated alfalfa such as the Grimm will be purchased for less money. I'd be perfectly willing to pay five or ten cents a pound above the regular market price for genuine Grimm, Baltic, or Cossack, especially if I wanted to have a field last for several years. You see new seedlings of alfalfa are not very apt to winterkill if the soil has plenty of lime, inoculation and drainage and the seed planted before the last of July. It's the old seedlings that catch it. So that those of us who only plan to leave our alfalfa fields stand for one or two years and then plow them up can get along pretty well with common alfalfa seed grown in Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas or other western states.

Most farmers want Montana grown seed but it has been found that Kansas and Nebraska alfalfa seeds are just as good as the more Northern grown alfalfa seeds which generally cost from $2 to $4 per bushel more. Well, I must be going. Start cutting tomorrow. Going to have a big crop. So much danger of rain at this time, I think I'll cure it under cap. I generally use the side delivery and hayloader for my second and third crops because it saves labor, goes faster and there is not so much danger of rain. Well, we farmers got to make hay while the sun shines. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, Sam. We must get together on this proposition. If our farmers get into the alfalfa business it will mean more milk, more cheese, more butter, more cows and more dollars for the farmer and everybody else. Alfalfa has worked wonders out West. It will do big things here. We have got to get behind the proposition and push. Good day again, Sam. I am busy too."