



What are some rules of thumb for knowing when it is time to harvest forage for hay (i.e., bermudagrass, tall fescue, annual ryegrass, alfalfa, oats, etc.)?

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Hybrid bermudagrasses

The 1st cut should be taken at 12-16 inches (some varieties are taller growing than others, so err on the shorter side if the variety typically doesn't get much taller than 14-15 inches). Perform subsequent cuttings at 3.5-5 week intervals. If the growth of the forage slows or stops before these target values are reached (e.g., drought, injury, etc.), the plant is likely to go dormant. If this is the case, cut and harvest or remove the forage. Time the late August or September hay cutting so that it is no later than 6 weeks prior to average date for the first killing frost. The final hay cutting can be taken after the killing frost (or the stockpiled forage can be grazed as a standing hay crop).

Tall fescue, annual ryegrass, orchardgrass, etc.

The first cutting should be taken at the mid to late boot stage to obtain the highest quality. Subsequent cuttings should be taken at 10-12 inches (better quality).

Small grains (rye, oats, wheat, etc.)

There are two opportunities to harvest small grains. The first opportunity is when the forage is in the boot stage. This gives the highest quality. The second opportunity is when the forage is in the dough stage. At this point, the seed has fully developed but the forage is not yet too indigestible. The presence of the grain improves the overall digestibility of the forage when harvested at this stage. Because of drying issues, small grains (as a forage) are frequently harvested at this stage of maturity. Only one harvest will be possible for small grains.

Alfalfa

(Note: these recommendations aid longevity of the stand in the South and may not be appropriate for more northern areas, especially when extremely high quality is desired.)

The first cutting in the spring should be taken when in the late bud – early bloom stage. It may take longer to achieve this level of maturity if the spring is unusually cool. So, if the forage has been 18 inches tall for more than 2 weeks but hasn't formed a bud or bloom, a harvest can still be taken without substantial damage occurring to the stand. In the spring after establishment, it is best to wait until 10-25% of plants are blooming. This will allow the root system and crown to be more fully developed and will prevent excessive losses early in the stand's life. If the root system and crown were well developed prior to the onset of winter, cutting at the earlier bloom stage (10%) will be acceptable. Alfalfa should be harvested at the early bloom/flower stage of growth (when 10% of plants have flowers). Harvesting at this growth stage represents the best compromise between forage yield, forage quality, and maintaining healthy stands. After the first cutting is taken, alfalfa will usually reach the early bloom stage of growth every 28 – 35 days.

Mixed stands of grass/legumes

Usually, it is best to use the harvest recommendations for whichever forage species will have the greatest effect on forage quality (or is most economically important). For example, if tall fescue is growing with red clover, cut whenever the tall fescue reaches the recommended growth stage. If alfalfa and orchardgrass are grown together, it usually will be best to cut at the appropriate stage for the alfalfa.

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