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The Effects of Late Season Usage on Cool Season Grasses

There was a time this spring when I was pretty worried about our cool-season grass stands. The end of 2019, combined with a couple of frost events in 2020 left, stands uneven. With a forecast calling for above normal temperatures and below-normal precipitation, reduced yields could have been followed by a poor recovery time period.

Fast forward to August. Most of the area has received excellent rainfall, and temperature post-harvest allowed hay fields to recover quickly and pastures to keep up with grazing. I've been monitoring six different hay fields across the District since harvest and most all of them have grown back to a height of five plus inches with greater than 75 percent canopy cover.

In fact, some stands have grown so well that there might be some temptation about utilizing them again this fall. In some instances, that can work quite well. In others, be cautious.

With adequate moisture and moderate temperatures (cool season grasses love the seventies...), grasses grow rapidly. The photosynthetic process kicks in, and green leaves transfer energy to leaves. When adequate leaf mass is achieved, energy is also returned to the root system. This helps maintain the plant through the winter and initiate greenup when conditions are right next spring. It's a simple, but often overlooked, process. When overlooked, it has a lot to do with how plants respond and prosper – or perish under certain conditions.

That leads us to this fall. Some stands have recovered so well that we might consider grazing them or even haying for a second time. In most cases, I would avoid that when possible. The risk of damage from stands that get hayed/grazed too short or that don't have a chance to adequately recover prior to dormancy is always present and too often experienced. That damage may not seem to be too bad but can affect the stand for years.

If grazing previously harvested hay fields this fall, do so with extreme caution (second cuttings of hay should be avoided...). As the stand is recovering, maintain at least four to six inches of green growth. Harvesting below a four-inch height means that the plant not only has to respond to the harvest of photosynthetic area but may have to deplete root reserves to do so. If adequate time and rest isn't given to replenish reserves, recovery will be slow next year as well.

Diseases of Peonies

Adequate moisture plus humidity plus days with dew on the grass all morning equals the perfect conditions for disease. If you have peonies, you may well be seeing them now.

If the leaves look like they have measles, it's likely red spot, a disease that results in reddish-purple spots on the upper leaf surfaces. Spots often grow together to form large blotches on the leaves or streaks on the stems.

If the leaves look like they've been dusted with flower, powdery mildew is the culprit. We don't see it often, but when we do, it can be deadly to the plant's leaves.

The 'cure': sanitation. Remove all diseased tissue, including stems, at the end of the growing season (we can remove all foliage in mid-August when plants are dormant and cause no long-term harm). Remove mulch that has plant debris, replacing with new mulch. This will help reduce the source of the disease to reduce the chance for an outbreak again next year.