

Failures

Carl S. Hoveland,
Crop & Soil Sciences Dept, Univ. of Georgia, Athens, GA

*Mistakes are a fact of life:
It is the response to the error that counts.*

– Nikki Giovanni

All of us encounter failures in various activities of life. Some failures are big such as farm bankruptcy caused by too much debt and low commodity prices. Other failures are smaller such as loss of a crop from drought, excessive rain, hail, or frost. A common problem on cattle farms is failure to obtain satisfactory stands of a grass or legume. Failures can be shrugged off as simply “bad luck” and often repeated again and again. We all know some people who always have a succession of failures or “hard luck.” There just might be a reason why these people continue to have more “hard luck” than their neighbors – they continue to repeat their mistakes. A better approach is to regard each failure as a learning experience and determine why there was a failure so mistakes will not be repeated. Generally, there is a reason why something went wrong and using a different approach next time may prevent mistakes from causing a failure.

Since many grasses and legumes are planted in autumn, this may be an opportune time to discuss some of the reasons for failure to obtain good stands.

(1) Timeliness. Some folks are always late in getting things done. Planting equipment may need repairs, seed was not purchased early so the best variety is sold out, soil test was not made early so no fertilizer and lime recommendations are available, or needed herbicide are not available. With autumn rainfall often limited, not being ready to plant when moisture conditions are favorable may result in stand failures because of dry soil. Timely planting costs no more, but the return on investment can be substantial.

(2) Planting at the wrong time of year.

When winter annual grasses and clovers are planted in winter, they have only a few months to grow before they mature seed and die which results in very low production. Planting in early autumn on prepared land gives the potential for a much longer productive grazing season. When tall fescue or orchardgrass are planted during late autumn in north Georgia, germination is slow and seedlings are not adequately established so may be killed during cold winters. Sprigging bermudagrass hybrids in late summer may result in poor stands because of drought and in north Georgia plants may be winterkilled. Planting at the proper time of year can help insure success.

(3) Planting after a row crop where herbicide residues remain in the soil may result in failure of forage seeds germinating. Herbicide such as Atrazine, Cadre, Pursuit, and Stalpe can result in residue problems for small grains, depending on soil texture, rainfall amounts, and length of time since application. Potential for this problem needs to be checked out before planting.

(4) Planting poor quality seed with low viability. “Cheap” seed are not cheap if only a poor stand is obtained. Cheap seed may also contain substantial amounts of weed seed. Buy seed with high germination potential.

(5) Hard or waxy seed coats will prevent germination. Arrowleaf clover has a very hard seed coat so that only about 10 to 20% of the seed will germinate when planted. Likewise, bahiagrass has a waxy seed coat that prevents germination. Scarification is necessary to insure adequate germination.

(6) Planting seed too deep. Most

grasses and clovers should not be planted deeper than 1/2 inch and some such as white clover require planting at less than 1/4 inch for good establishment. On a well prepared seedbed, this can be easily accomplished with a cultipack seeder.

(7) No-till planting on bahiagrass and bermudagrass sods can have failures for several reasons. Planting should not be done until the grass is going dormant or competition will be too severe for new seedlings. Old grass residue should be mowed or grazed off to allow planting and good establishment of rye, ryegrass, or clovers. Arrowleaf and crimson clover seedlings can be destroyed by crickets unless controlled with insecticide.

(8) No-till planting of red or white clovers with a drill in tall fescue sod in autumn can sometimes fail because of crown and stem rot disease. Crickets can also cause losses at this time of year. Winter planting will greatly reduce stand losses from disease or insects. Old grass residue must be mowed or grazed off or there will be poor clover stands. Broadcast planting of these clovers on tall fescue and cattle trampling in early autumn is almost certain to fail because of crickets and grass competition. Except for extreme north Georgia (where clovers can be planted earlier), broadcast seeding of clover in tall fescue has been most successful in January and February when pastures are normally grazed closely and pest problems are low.

Failure to get stands of forage grasses and clovers is not just “bad luck” but often a result of failing to use planting procedures that will favor success. When a planting failure does occur, try to learn what went wrong and not repeat the mistake.