

Grassland Oregon

Blog

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Here's what it's like using Frosty Berseem Clover, straight from an Idaho farmer.

Frosty Berseem Clover:

Everything you wanted to know about using it in a grass on grass crop rotation but were too afraid to ask.

By Don Baune

When it comes to trying something new on the farm it's not uncommon for hay producers to stick with what has worked for them in the past. That can be understandable given the demand from the hay buyers to be consistent for quality hay, especially to the dairy producers. A new option for better hay is cold-tolerant Frosty berseem clover. Frosty has been shown to increase yields up to 20%, increase protein by 12%, RFV by 11% and profits by up to 25%.

One grower in South Idaho stepped outside his comfort zone and decide to give Frosty berseem clover a try. Justin Place of Place Farms in Homer, Idaho acted on an advertising card sent to him last year and planted Frosty berseem on 132 ac. to help break his grass on grass rotation cycle. Here's what he had to say about his experience.



GO: Justin, please describe your farm to us.

Justin: “Our farm is in southeast Idaho. We’re in quite sandy ground, to kind of sandy to a loam type soil. We transitioned from a full conventional tillage program to a no-till program and were looking for a crop that we can rotate with barley and wheat that will break some disease cycles. You know, we’ve been very selective on where the potatoes have been, rotation-wise. We’re really in the very beginning stages of our whole no-till program. We were looking for something else we could put in that mix, that could go barley and small grains, and then have something that we could rotate that would be a no-till type product that could come back into with grain again without disturbing the soils. That’s what really enticed us into the clover side of things.”

GO: Where did you first hear about Frosty?

Justin: “You know, I must admit, the postcard fliers worked. That’s where I first heard about Frosty. We received a postcard in the mail. We had raised Berseem clover, it’s been many years ago. We put it in with an alfalfa crop, just as a nurse crop. We put it in, like five pounds with 15 pounds of our alfalfa to help establish the stand for the first year. But you know, we hadn’t gone back to it. When we saw the Frosty, we said, “Let’s try growing just straight Frosty Berseem.” The old variety that we had raised, any little frost, or any little inclination that it was going to get cold, you’d singe the old berseem down and it was done. That was kind of our holdback on clover before.”



GO: Did it meet your expectation for frost tolerance?

Justin: “It did, yeah. You know, we had a few nights that cooled off pretty good. I thought, “Man, we’re going to put this to the test.” I think we dropped it down to about 27, 26 degrees, and I said, “Man, I got a whole field of this out there.” With most of the plants in the four and five leaf stages. I thought, “This is going to either really work or it’s going to smoke the whole field at once.” Then everything, kind of turned a little bit of a purple color, but just kept throwing leaves and kept coming. I was impressed with the frost tolerance in that regard. Even this fall, after, we took our last cutting off, it started to come back. Then we got into some real cold weather. It slowed way down, but it was still alive all the way up until it turned to a frozen block. But yeah, we were quite impressed with the way it handled the frost for what we were doing.”



GO: Did it work on breaking up your crop rotation from planting grass on grass?

Justin: "It did. But we did have some harvesting issues with it. Frosty or whatever clover you have, there's no cut delay. An alfalfa plant, you cut it and it doesn't start throwing leaves again right away. It gives you just a little lag before it starts coming back from the big haircut. But the clover, on the other hand, you cut it and it starts growing leaves the next day again. We had a few challenges to dry it before we could bale it. Once we got it in a bale, it's beautiful in the bale. It tests very, very well. But drying it was an issue for us. By third crop, we kind of had it figured out. To dry it, we had to lay the windrow as wide as we could to dry down. Then we'll roll it together and bale. It doesn't give you a very long window in our area to bale, because once the sun goes down, it will start transpiring and pulling moisture back up into the windrow. It would go from practically dry to a little bit dry to wet real fast. I think some of that's the big leaf. Frosty's got a big leaf on it. You need to manage for that a little bit different than we did with the alfalfa."

GO: Is there anything that really surprised you about when you planted the Frosty?

Justin: "You know, I don't know that it really did. It was a beautiful stand. All in all, we feel like it did a very good job. Where we clear-seeded it, we had a very good stand. It really yielded quite well. It did a great job for us."

GO: Are there one or two benefits of the Frosty that really stuck out in your mind for the farm?

Justin: "Well, the one benefit is, it costs less to produce than alfalfa does. You know, the one-year, one-shot thing. It gives us a rotational product that we can use. It's another tool in the toolbox. Water-wise, once we got the taproots down, it seemed to be fairly fuel efficient on the water. We could water it and kind of let it sit, then water it, let it sit, it wasn't a real water hog like I thought it might be. It was probably a little less water usage than the alfalfa. By comparison, to watch the Frosty, as it cured down in the bale it gets darker. When I stacked it beside an alfalfa stack the alfalfa gets whiter, and Frosty doesn't bleach, it just gets darker as the sun shines on it, it seems like."

GO: Have you fed any of the Frosty yet to your animals?

Justin: “We pushed the moisture a little bit on the third cutting. So, we went in and pulled the bales out that were starting to heat a little bit. We pulled those out, fed them to the sheep and it was interesting to watch the sheep. They just all but licked the ground to get the last little bit of that stuff scooped up. They really seemed to like it quite well.”

GO: Would you recommend Frosty to others?

Justin: “I would for the right guys. I think it would be a good crop. The short seasons here that we have is a little bit of a challenge. This year was not the late fall like we’ve had the past several. The last three or four years we’re way into October, November, before it really gets cold. This year, we were in the latter part of September we were freezing every night. So, we were pretty much done growing anything by the latter part of September. It would’ve been nice if we’d had a longer fall. I really think we probably could’ve pulled another short cutting off it if we’d had one of those real late falls’ like we’ve had.”



So what we are seeing is that farmers are wanting to move into no-till situations and they are trying to figure out which is the best crop to use. Frosty berseem clover seems to be a great fit for this. The difference with Frosty is its improved winter-hardiness compared to VNS berseem, or varieties from warmer climates, that are available in the market today. Although this improvement might not always equate to winter survival, it does allow for more biomass production (which helps with N production, erosion control, weed suppression, etc.). Frosty berseem clover establishes very easily and works well when weed suppression and erosion control are some of your goals. This means Frosty berseem clover can be a species to consider as another tool for working into your crop rotation.