

News Column

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MUSK THISTLES AND ALFALFA BLOOMS

It's that time of year again – a time when farmers and ranchers sometimes show their K-State pride by providing an abundance of beautiful purple flowers for passersby to enjoy.

If you think it is intentional, you are probably wrong. Alfalfa fields that are in full bloom should have been harvested a week or two ago. Some fields are late to bloom this year, having been set back by weevils, but the first cutting should still be harvested before full bloom. In some cases, rains may have delayed harvest and led to the abundance of purple flowers you are seeing.

For the optimal balance between high protein and tonnage, alfalfa should be harvested at about 1/10th bloom,...after the first cutting. The first cutting should be harvested before it blooms because it is already regrowing from the crown when it blooms the first time in the spring.

Closer examination than just a drive-by is needed to time the first alfalfa cutting correctly. You'll need to walk into the field, and maybe get down on your hands and knees to look for regrowth at the base of the plant. The first sign of regrowth is your trigger to harvest.

The reason for harvesting at the first sign of regrowth is to prevent cutting that regrowth off when swathing. If you do that, the plant will have to start over again, wasting energy reserves and wasting growing days.

Subsequent cuttings will bloom before regrowth starts. The second, third, and fourth

cuttings can be made at about 1/10th bloom. If you make every cutting on time, and if it rains in the fall, you might even get a fifth cutting.

Now, about those other purple flowers we always see this time of year – musk thistles. At this stage there are no good options,...unless you really enjoy manual labor. If you have musk thistles with purple flowers, the heads need to be popped off and the thistles dug with a shovel.

If you just dig the thistles and leave them lay, or if you try to control them with a herbicide at this stage, the flowers will continue to develop and will make viable seed. Leaving them in the field or pasture will result in a bountiful crop of thistles this fall and next spring.

I have far too much experience digging thistles, a skill I perfected during my high school a college years. I've tried a knife, scissors, and loppers for removing purple heads, and none of those methods are good. The best and fastest approach involves a long sleeve shirt and a leather glove.

I head to the pasture wearing the shirt and glove, while carrying an old paper feed sack and dragging a shovel. I have tried making a couple of slits in the bag and running my belt through it, and that kind of works. It fails when the bag gets full though.

The process is simple, but you want to do things in the right order. Pull the flowers off first and toss them into the bag, then dig the thistle. If you dig the thistle first, it is much harder to pop the heads off.

You don't have to dig deep to kill thistles; just cut them right below the soil surface. Big thistles can be really tough to dig, so you might even want to sharpen your shovel.

I sometimes leave a few flowers that are just starting to develop, but I chop them off once the thistle is knocked down. If you leave even the smallest flower there may be enough juice in the stem for that flower to mature and make seed.

The job would probably go four times as fast with two people working together because a lot of time is lost switching from pulling heads to picking up the shovel and digging. If your marriage is really strong, take your spouse along and you'll be done in time to go out to dinner after.

There is also a chance you'll be going to dinner alone. Digging thistles is not a fun job.

If you have questions you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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