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June 2011

Section II

Alfalfa

Chapter 11

Introduction

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Alfalfa is an herbaceous, deep-rooted and quite long-lived perennial legume. It is often referred to as the "Queen of the Forages" because it is a highly productive crop and one of the most palatable, nutritious, and widely adapted forage species. The term "alfalfa" is Arabic meaning "best fodder." In Europe, alfalfa is referred to as "lucerne". It is grown in most areas of the United States under a wide range of environments; from high elevations with very short growing seasons to low elevations where production occurs year round.

Domestication of the horse began around 2500 B.C. somewhere in the Ukraine or Inner Asia. The care, feeding, and breeding of horses were of supreme importance, especially for kings and aristocracy. The horse was valuable for conducting war and conquering at greater distances. It was at this time that alfalfa also began to be domesticated, perhaps to provide feed for horses. Alfalfa is the oldest domesticated crop grown exclusively for forage.

The Spaniards introduced alfalfa to the western hemisphere in the 16th century. Alfalfa was successfully grown in the irrigated desert oases around Lima, Peru by 1650. It was first grown in the United States in Georgia in 1736. Early attempts to grow alfalfa in various regions of the eastern states were not always successful. The crop did not spread north from Mexico until the late 19th century. Introductions of alfalfa into California from Peru in 1841 and from Chile around 1850 resulted in rapid expansion of production through Great Britain and on into the Colorado Rockies.



Fig. 1. Alfalfa is "Queen of the Forages" because it is highly productive, nutritious, and widely adapted.

In Colorado during the late 19th century, cattle grazed the open range but the land was soon overstocked and overgrazed. When severe winters occurred, large numbers of livestock died because feed was scarce. This prompted the development of haying, first with native grasses in meadows along streams and then with alfalfa produced using newly developed irrigation methods.

Alfalfa has become one of the three most valuable crops in Colorado. In 2009, 3.32 million tons of alfalfa hay were produced in Colorado on 850,000 acres with an estimated value of \$457 million. In some years, the value of alfalfa in Colorado exceeds that of wheat and corn.

The information contained in this section on alfalfa is intended to provide the reader with sufficient detail to set production objectives and goals and to make informed decisions to produce high quality alfalfa in the Intermountain areas of Colorado and surrounding states.