In the USA, the area planted to alfalfa (Medicago sativa L.) increased from approximately 0.8 million ha (2 million acres) in 1900, to a peak of approximately 12.1 million ha (30 million acres) in 1958 (Fig. 20-1). The area involved in alfalfa production decreased gradually after 1962 to 10.2 million ha (25.2 million acres) in 1983 but stabilized between 10.4 and 10.9 million ha (25.7–26.8 million acres) by 1985. Expansion of alfalfa in the USA has followed regional trends. Early alfalfa introductions into the Eastern States failed because of soil acidity except for a few locations near Syracuse, NY and on limestone soils in Virginia (34). By the late 1930s, alfalfa was established as a major crop in the Northeastern region. After the late 1940s, this region accounted for approximately 8% of the total alfalfa area in the USA (5, 16, 41, 56). Successful introductions of Chilean, Peruvian, and Spanish alfalfa types into the West in the mid-1800s established the Western region as the primary alfalfa-producing area (34, 41, 56). Lack of winterhardiness in these alfalfas limited their use in other regions. Identification and development of winter-hardy cultivars from introduced strains stimulated the expansion of alfalfa in the North Central region. Alfalfa production was concentrated in the North Central region by the late 1930s. The Western and North Central States have remained the major growing regions in the USA with 25 and 57% of the total, respectively. The South Central, Mid-Atlantic region contains 6 to 7% and the Southern region <1% of the total alfalfa area in the USA.

Several factors contributed to the regional growth patterns of the alfalfa industry. These have been divided into sequential events: (i) Prior