



Species  
Perennial Forage Legume  
**Birdsfoot Trefoil**  
Illinois

**General Information**

Birdsfoot Trefoil is a non-bloating, perennial forage legume that originated in the Mediterranean basin region.

Birdsfoot Trefoil grows to a height of two to three feet, with many slender, leafy, branches coming from each crown. The flowers are typical five petaled legume flowers. They are yellow with orange or red tinges.

Leaves are compound and alternate, with five leaflets. The lower two leaflets are smaller and stipule-like at the base of the petiole. Leaves tend to close with darkness.

Three to five seed pods are attached at right angles to the end of the seed stalk. They are cylindrical and nearly black when mature.

The arrangement resembles a bird's foot, which gives the plant its common name.

Most varieties have a tap root. However a rhizomatous strain has been discovered, and the trait is being bred into new varieties.

**Adaptability**

Birdsfoot Trefoil is tolerant to a wide range of sites, and is most productive on moderately-well to well-drained soils. Birdsfoot Trefoil will persist in wet, shallow, fragipan and heavy clay soils too wet for alfalfa, and is more drought tolerant than ladino clover. Trefoil is quite tolerant to acid soil, and does well in the 5.5 - 6.5 pH range.

**Establishment**

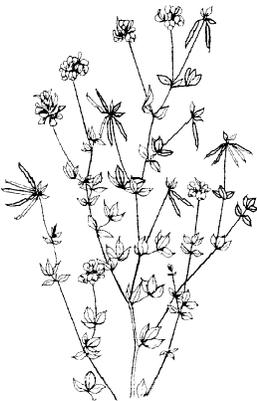
Soil amendments should be added at seeding time, and incorporated during seedbed preparation. Lime should be added to bring the pH up to at least 6.0 at planting time. Place seed about one-fourth inch deep, and firm the soil around it using seeding equipment with packer wheels or cultipack the field after seeding.

Check with the Natural Resources Conservation Service or University Extension for proper seeding rates.

Inoculate seed with a birdsfoot Trefoil specific rhizobium bacteria. Seed lots containing high percentages of hard seed should be scarified.

Birdsfoot Trefoil is often seeded in mixtures with grasses and other legumes. The seeding rate should be reduced to the percentage wished for in the established stand.

Birdsfoot Trefoil is somewhat slow to establish, and does not tolerate shading well. Therefore, competitive plants must be controlled during the establishment period.



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## **Establishment** (Continued)

The best suited varieties for the northern part of Illinois are Norcen and Dawn. For the southern portion, AU Dewey may be a better choice.

When available, the new rhizomatous varieties should be a valuable addition to the list of suited varieties.

## **Management**

Birdsfoot Trefoil starts growth in April with peak growth in June. But growth persists throughout the summer if moisture is available.

Being moderately deep rooted, the ability to draw on moisture deep in the soil provides good summer production during most years.

As with other legumes, nitrogen fertilization should be limited to moderate fall applications to limit competition from the grass component of the mixture.

Birdsfoot Trefoil is thought to be best suited to the northern part of Illinois, but will grow throughout the state when properly managed.

Birdsfoot Trefoil does not store large amounts of carbohydrates; therefore, complete defoliation, such as haying or heavy grazing.

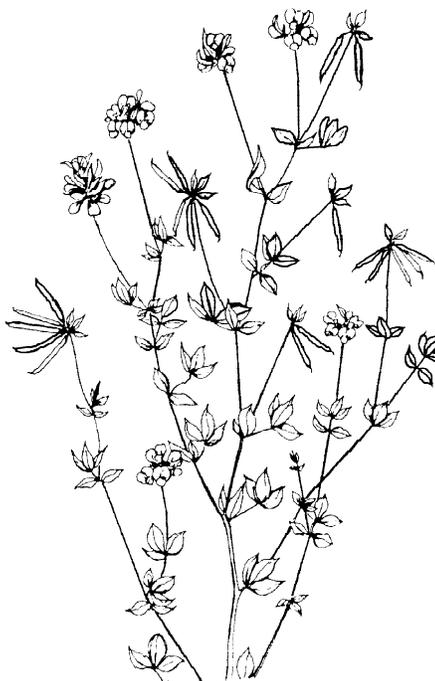
Being very palatable, forces trefoil to behave as a decreaser under heavy or continuous grazing. Like other legumes, birdsfoot Trefoil requires rest after grazing, should be avoided.

Birdsfoot Trefoil is susceptible to crown and root rot, reducing the life span of individual plants. With current varieties a 45-day rest should be provided, at least every other year during the flowering period, ensuring reseeding to replace plants lost to attrition.

The new rhizomatous varieties should be able to replace lost plants through vegetative reproduction.

## **Where To Get Help**

For more information about birdsfoot Trefoil, contact the local office of the Natural Resources Conservation Service listed in the telephone directory under "U.S. Government," or the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service.



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