

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

SPECIES • COOL-SEASON PERENNIAL FORAGE LEGUMES

Bird's-foot Trefoil



Photo by: Robert H. Mohlenbrock
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PLANTS Database

General Information

There are two Annual Lespedezas used for pasture and hay in Illinois: Striate (or Common) and Korean. Common originated in Japan and was introduced into the United States in 1846. Korean was introduced from Korea in 1919.

A good way to distinguish the two from each other is by their stem hairs. The hairs on Korean slant up, while those on Common slant down.

The leaves of Korean turn upward after flowering to protect the seed pods. Leaves do not protect the seed pod on Common.

The plant will vary in height from four to 24 inches, depending on growing conditions. The flowers range from purple to pink in all varieties.

Adaptability

Annual lespedeza will grow in most types of soil that are well drained. Lespedezas tolerate low fertility, yet respond to lime and phosphorus. Annual lespedeza is best suited to a pH of 5.5 - 6.0, but can produce good yields with pH levels as low as 5.0.

Lespedeza is very drought resistant, likes hot weather, and produces well throughout the warm season. Being an annual, year-to-year production is more dependent on the current weather conditions.

Annual lespedeza was more widely used in the 1940s and 1950s. Several factors contributed to its decline: the drought of 1953 and 1954; susceptibility to bacterial wilt and tar spot; and the increased use of fertilizer on fescue. Legumes find it difficult to compete with fertilized, aggressive grasses.

Establishment

Annual lespedeza should be planted in the spring, into a well prepared, firm seedbed, to which any needed fertilizer has been incorporated. An alternate method is to broadcast over pastures in late winter, allowing normal freezing and thawing to work the seed into the soil. Frost seeding is often done during fertilizer application and can be quite successful if the nitrogen level is limited.

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



Once established, enough seed should be produced to perpetuate the stand.

The Korean varieties best adapted to Illinois are Korean and Summit. Kobe and Marion are the best adapted Striate or Common types for Illinois.

Management

Lespedeza is a non-bloating legume that is palatable to all kinds of grazing livestock and does a good job of supplying high quality forage during the warm season when cool-season grasses become dormant.

Established with endophyte infected fescue, the effect is diluted by supplying a non-contaminated component to the ration.

When mature, an anti-lactation factor in the seed can cause a reduction in milk production in dairy cows.

Hay yields, though not high, are good quality with few curing problems because of the late harvesting date.

Annual lespedeza is compatible with most of the cool-season grasses as long as nitrogen levels are not too high.

Lespedeza may be one of the best legumes to use with warm-season grasses because of matches in growth cycle. Probably one of the best at surviving close, continuous grazing. When closely grazed, Lespedeza tends to grow low to the ground and escapes utilization allowing seed production.

The seed provides a high-quality food for quail and other seed-eating wildlife. The forage is used as browse by deer, turkey and rabbits. The ability to provide good production with lower levels of management, annual lespedeza works well in low input forage systems.

Where to Get Help

For more information about annual lespedeza, 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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