

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

SPECIES • BIENNIAL LEGUMES

Sweet Clover



General Information

Sweet Clover may be utilized as good quality hay, somewhat comparable in palatability and feeding value to alfalfa.

The second year's growth produces coarse stems and is high in moisture content. However, the best use may be as a silage crop.

The best quality silage is made when the crop is cut before the plant begins to bloom. To provide excellent grazing during the spring and summer of second year.

Characteristics

There are two species of biennial Sweet Clovers: yellow and white.

White Sweet Clover grows two to seven feet tall. Yellow Sweet Clover grows one-and-one-half to five feet tall.

The yellow type is finer stemmed, has smaller leaves, and blooms 10-20 days earlier than the white species.

There are 10 to 96 florets per bloom stem. One way to tell the difference between Sweet Clover and alfalfa is that the Sweet Clover leaf is serrated around the edge completely, whereas the alfalfa leaf is serrated only on one-third to one-half of the margin nearest the tip.

Adaptability

Sweet Clover is very adaptable to most soil types, but it requires a pH of 6.0 or higher and has a higher calcium requirement.

Sweet Clover obtains phosphorus from relatively unavailable soil phosphates, and will grow in soils where alfalfa, red clover or ladino clover fail.

Sweet Clover will produce under dry conditions. The Madrid variety is especially tolerant to dry conditions.

Establishment

Sweet Clover can be planted from February 15 to April 1.

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

Plant seeds about one-half inch deep with a grain drill, cultipacker seeder with a small-seed attachment or by broadcasting. Inoculate the seed with Group 1 commercial inoculant.

Management

Sweet Clover will provide its best quality hay if mowed just as first blooms appear, usually in May or June.

Livestock will learn to like Sweet Clover if they are allowed to start grazing when the plants are eight to ten inches tall.

Under a system of continuous grazing, maintain a minimum average top growth of about four inches.

With rotational grazing, the plant may be grazed to a minimum average height of about three inches. The grazing animals should be removed when this level of usage is reached.

Forage should be allowed to make a minimum average regrowth height of about six inches before the animals are returned to the field. When this minimum height is maintained for an extended period of time, the minimum regrowth height should be about nine inches before the animals are returned to the field.

These minimum grazing heights pertain only to the growing season, when there is ample moisture and fertility to generate adequate regrowth during the rest period. Maintain a minimum height of four inches when the plant normally becomes dormant, or when it quits growing.

Two or more fields or pastures are needed for a rotational grazing system. However, this system is generally more productive and manageable when three or more grazing units are used to complete a grazing schedule. A 24-day to 30-day rest normally is required, depending upon rainfall, temperature, fertility, etc.

With a two-pasture system, graze 12 to 15 days and rest the pasture 12 to 15 days. With a three-pasture system, allow the animals to graze eight to 10 days, and then rest the pasture 16 to 20 days.

Restrict or exclude grazing during the hot, dry months. Sweet Clover may be grazed lightly during this period when fertility and soil moisture are adequate to produce new growth.

When managing Sweet Clover for seed, combine it direct when the majority of seeds are mature, and before excessive shattering begins.

When about two-thirds of the seeds turn brown, (usually in July) mow the crop, and windrow it with a side delivery rake in the early morning when the crop is slightly damp and tough. After a few days of drying, thresh directly from the windrow with a rotary pickup attachment on the combine.

When Sweet Clover is used to improve soil, best results are obtained if turned under or cut into the surface with a disk at maximum growth. Follow with a summer or early fall crop.

Where to Get Help

For more information about Sweet Clover, 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.



USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

ILLINOIS • 2000

il.nrcs.usda.gov/