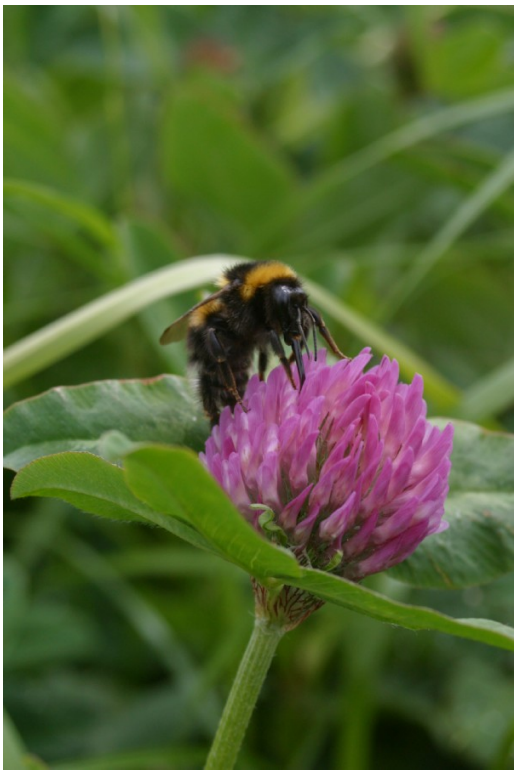
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Legumes for Farmers



Legumes, grown with grass or on their own, play an important role in providing highly nutritious forage and free nitrogen.

All legumes share the ability to collect nitrogen from the air and make it available in the soil for plant growth. Legume-rich forage is therefore low cost as it requires little or no nitrogen fertiliser. Legumes are also high in protein and, because they are particularly relished by livestock, improve animal performance. There are twelve legumes commonly used including the true clovers, the medics, sainfoin, birdsfoot trefoil and vetches.

True Clovers

White Clover (Trifolium repens)

White clover is probably one of the most valuable plants in existence and is the most popular forage legume. It differs from other clovers in having a stolon (or stem) that runs along the ground. This produces edible leaves and flower heads at low levels, making it ideal for grazing. It is long lasting and drought resistant and grows on nearly all soils. White clover has received more research funding than any other legume and so is well understood. In common with most fodder legumes, it is best grown with grasses which increase total forage yield and produce a flexible sward which can be cut or grazed.

White clover has a high protein content at around 20-25%. Perennial ryegrass contains about 16%. Combining these two together in the field increases the overall protein content of forage by 2-3% to around 20%. The extra protein available from clover leys has a direct impact on live weight gains. At the same time, grazing animals consume more as they find clover very palatable. This all results in animals fattening faster compared to those on non-clover leys.

There is a large range of white clovers available, classified by leaf size, with the tolerance for close grazing increasing as leaf size decreases. Medium-leaved varieties, such as AberHerald and AberPearl, are good for grazing, silage or hay. Large-leaved strains, such as Alice, give slightly higher yields but are less persistent when grazed and are therefore for cutting only.

Red Clover (Trifolium pratense)

Red clover produces a third more yield than white clover but is less persistent, only lasting for between two and four years. It is normally used to produce silage, although it can be grazed occasionally. It is an erect and dominant plant that is best sown with aggressive ryegrasses. However, it may be included in more complex seed mixes but its inclusion rate must be low to counter its aggression. It grows on nearly all soils except acidic ones where alsike clover should be used.

Red clover contains oestrogen which can cause concern to livestock breeders. Freshly grazed forage causes most concern but the problem can be avoided by moving breeding animals off red clover

around conception. Cattle are not normally affected but ewes should be taken off red clover at least a month either side of tupping.

Modern plant breeding programmes have increased disease and pest resistance and improved persistence with varieties such as Milvus and Merula. There are two distinct types of red clover: early and late flowering. The former starts spring growth earlier in May followed by another growth flush. The latter flowers 10-14 days later after its one main growth period.

Alsike Clover (Trifolium hybridum)

A perennial which is slower to grow in the spring than red clover and is slightly lower yielding but otherwise has similar characteristics.

Crimson Clover (Trifolium incarnatum)

An annual which can be sown after an early-harvested cereal to provide winter sheep keep. It can also be used to give soil a fertility boost in a short period of time.

Persian Clover (Trifolium resupinatum)

An annual used to provide a quick boost to soil fertility on most soil types. It provides a good forage which may be grazed or conserved.

Berseem Clover (Trifolium alexandrium)

Also known as Egyptian Clover, this is a short term, fast growing annual clover, which quickly provides large amounts of biomass and improves soil fertility. The least winter hardy of the true clovers.

Lucerne (Medicago sativa)

No one can really understand why so little lucerne (or alfalfa) is grown in the UK, when worldwide there are 13 million hectares cropped for forage. There are however a small number of UK farms now retrying this capable legume. Cut three times a year, it produces a protein-rich 14t DM per hectare without nitrogen fertiliser and on dryland. Lucerne is a large plant with a similar erect growth habit to red clover. It is deep rooting, very drought resistant and has a yield high enough to be grown on its own. However it is usually sown

with a companion grass such as meadow fescue or timothy which fill in the bottom of the crop. Lucerne is useful to dairy farmers wanting to produce a high protein silage that is complementary to maize. It can be quite slow to establish and is only suitable for free-draining land that is not acidic.

Sainfoin (Onobrychis viciifolia)

Along with other forage legumes, sainfoin offers free nitrogen and extra protein content. But it has other benefits that mark it out as unique. Sainfoin is capable of growing on the thinnest of alkaline soils, particularly the dry chalk and limestone land in the south of England. It is extremely drought-resistant and never stops growing, even in prolonged dry spells. Its root structure leaves soil in excellent condition and sainfoin can be considered an invaluable part of a light land rotation. It penetrates soil and rock to a great depth where it seems able to extract nutrients better than any other species.

Sainfoin contains tannins which aid protein absorption resulting in faster liveweight gains when compared to any other forage. This may also help reduce the amount of methane produced by ruminants, very useful from an environmental perspective. These tannins have another benefit: they mean sainfoin never causes bloat. Trials have shown that as little as 20% of sainfoin in the diet can offset the risk of bloat to near zero.

Sainfoin has a remarkable effect on wormy lambs, being a natural anthelmintic. EU projects ‘Healthy

Hay' and 'LegumePlus' have confirmed that feeding sainfoin disrupts the lifecycle of parasitic worms, so improving livestock performance yet further.

Sweet Clover (Melilotus spp.)

Also known as yellow blossom, this biennial which has a feed value similar to lucerne and can produce huge quantities of green material in July if sown in May. It is also a very good green manure, fixing a great deal of nitrogen and adding huge amounts of organic matter to the soil.

Yellow Trefoil (Medicago lupulina)

This is a low growing, short-lived plant which sheds seeds freely and so regenerates itself. It is sometimes included in seed mixtures to give early spring growth which is unusual as most legumes are quite late to start growing.

Birdsfoot Trefoil (Lotus corniculatus)

Like sainfoin, this legume contains tannins and is best suited to poorer soils where it outperforms other legumes. Including birdsfoot trefoil in seed mixes may offer other medicinal benefits, something that is currently being researched.

Vetches (Vicia sativa)

This legume, also known as tares, when sown in the autumn or spring can provide one large crop for silage, and is excellent at out-competing weeds, fixing large amounts of nitrogen and improving soil structure.

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