

Lespedeza Pasture Seed

Lespedeza Hay and Pasture Seed - Pure stands of lespedeza produce one to two tons of hay per acre. Harvest for hay at the early bloom stage, which normally occurs around August 1. This stage of maturity produces high quality forage and still allows time for the plants to produce seed. Mixtures of a cool season grass and lespedeza can be used for hay or pasture and should yield two to three tons of dry matter per acre. Cool season grass-annual lespedeza mixtures produce less total annual yield but more and higher quality growth in mid- to late summer than grass plus nitrogen fertilizer. Grass and lespedeza mixtures managed for hay produces two cuttings by August 1. The first harvest should be taken by mid- to late May and should be primarily grass. Delaying this first cutting severely reduces the amount of lespedeza in the following cutting. The regrowth is primarily lespedeza and yields up to two tons of dry matter per acre by about August 1. Manage mixtures of grass and lespedeza for pasture by reducing grass competition in spring by grazing or clipping in May and avoiding nitrogen use in spring. Lespedeza pasture can be used by all types of livestock, but is especially valuable for cattle backgrounding operations. Grazing research on lespedeza generally shows high individual performance with limited total gain per acre, which reflects its low yield compared to other forage legumes. Lespedeza produces 13 to 14% crude protein depending on time of harvest.

The only perennial species of lespedeza used for forage to any extent in Kentucky is sericea (*L. cuneata*). It is drought resistant, but not well adapted to poorly drained soils. It may be used in pasture or hay mixtures, sown at rates up to 30 pounds per acre. Hay quality is extremely low unless harvested when 12 to 15 inches in height. Likewise, animal acceptance and gains are best if the sericea is kept less than 12 to 15 inches in height. Because of its low seedling vigor, it should be established before overseeding with grasses such as tall fescue. Very little growth occurs in Kentucky before late May.

Sericea lespedeza is naturally high in tannin, which is a component of some forages that can cause poor acceptance in ruminants. Although reduced-tannin varieties are available (Serala, AU Lotan, AU Donnelly) and have performed well in Alabama, there are no data on their performance for Kentucky. In general, performance of cattle grazing sericea in Kentucky and other states has been poor because of poor animal acceptance and due to its naturally high tannin content. In grass-sericea pastures, grazing animals tend to eat the grass first and avoid sericea. In these cases, sericea becomes overmature and cannot support animal gains because of low forage quality. Proper utilization of sericea in pastures usually depends on using a grazing system to force animals to graze sericea earlier when quality is higher. Alabama data indicate the use of a variety of sericea that is lower in tannin content results in improved animal gains compared to common sericea. However, be certain the variety is adapted to Kentucky before committing large areas to its use.

Sericea is useful for soil improvement, wildlife cover and erosion control on roadsides. Two varieties for this purpose are "Interstate", developed by the Alabama Experiment Station, and "Appalow", developed by the Quicksand Plant Introduction Station of the Soil Conservation Service in cooperation with the University of Kentucky.

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