

Pasture Legumes - Something for Nothing

By Keith Carmichael

We have all been cautioned to be skeptical of the idea of getting ‘something for nothing’. “If it’s too good to be true, it probably is”, we’ve been told. In the beef business though, there are two times when we can get something for nothing – one is when we use heterosis or cross-breeding to produce more pounds of beef, and the other is when we use legumes- clovers, alfalfa and annual lespedeza to add protein and nitrogen to pasture to produce more pounds of beef. With commercial N prices now ‘through the roof’... now is the time to get serious about next year’s grazing program and pasture fertility.

Legumes pay their own way

In addition to being a very important protein source in the pasture mix; legumes like clovers and annual lespedeza add diversity and produce their own nitrogen, which eventually becomes available to grasses as well. At today’s nitrogen prices, the cost of seed and establishment is easily offset by an increase in animal performance or the added nitrogen produced – one or the other is FREE –take your pick. Over-seeding pastures and hay fields with legumes is basic, common sense management, but which is best for your operation? The answer is probably... ‘**All of the above**’. No single legume can do it all. Soil fertility, pH, texture, and drainage all help determine which legume is best for a particular pasture.

Annual Lespedeza

Annual Lespedeza is again in the spotlight because it is amazingly tolerant to drought conditions and low pH soils. It is also one of the few legumes that do not cause bloat. Consider adding annual lespedeza with other legumes into cool-season grass pastures because these grasses leave a significant forage gap during the summer months. Milk production, calf weights and reproductive efficiency are all closely tied to the animal nutrition during this period. The effects of endophyte toxicity in fescue pastures during this time are hard to measure, but well documented. This fungus affects all of animal performance -especially reproduction. Annual lespedeza in pastures can ‘dilute’ and significantly reduce its effect. With annual lespedeza, it’s all about ‘timing’! It provides what you need most – WHEN you need it! Keep in mind, annual lespedeza is not to be confused with its perennial cousin – Sericea which is weed problem in many areas.

Another reason for renewed interest in annual lespedeza recently is the development of new types and varieties. **Legend**, an annual-striate lespedeza that is now in its 10th year of commercial production, continues to dominate forage tests. It can be used for either pasture or hay, and it can be grown with several grasses. It has been grown effectively in nearly all of the lower Midwest and throughout the South, from southern Iowa and southeast Kansas to Georgia. A number of producers have also found the Legend lespedeza to work well with warm-season grasses, with adequate management, in both grazing and hay production in areas in Mississippi, Alabama and Florida.

Legend has longer, narrower leaves than other annual types, and in some tests has grown 6-8 inches taller than the popular Marion variety. In addition to being taller, Legend also appears to have a much greater leaf to stem ratio with its leaves much closer to the ground. Dry matter yield estimates taken in single-cutting side-by-side comparisons have shown the new ‘Legend’ lespedeza has a definite yield advantage over all other types and varieties. In some cases the advantage has been 2 to 1. In the single-cutting test conducted in southern Arkansas, Legend was the top yielder –out producing the next closest variety by 35%. More importantly, in most areas, this new lespedeza exhibits a definite advantage in drought tolerance and the ability to reseed itself when other types do not. Producers who have grown a variety of lespedezas over the years characterize Legend as a very leafy lespedeza that grows taller and reseeds itself very well. For More information about Legend call 800-753-6511 or go to www.Cutting-Edgeproducts.com.

