Birdsfoot Trefoil

Howell N. Wheaton
Birdsfoot trefoil is the best long-lived perennial legume to use in permanent pastures in the northern half of Indiana. It shows remarkable adaptation to be used with Kentucky bluegrass.

**Characteristics**

Birdsfoot trefoil has the ability to withstand the extremes of both wet and dry weather as well as high temperatures. Because of this characteristic it is extremely valuable used in combination with Kentucky bluegrass.

Seed pods form from mid-June until fall. Also, ungrazed plants growing on manure and urine spots produce many seed pods. When these pods open, seeds scatter several feet. This growth habit helps to thicken and hold a stand even with vigorous bluegrass competition. The birdsfoot trefoil plant closely resembles a fine stemmed alfalfa and will not stand erect unless supported by a grass. The root system is somewhat an intermediate between alfalfa and red clover. It develops a strong tap root that usually does not go as deep as alfalfa but goes deeper than that of red clover.

**Establishment**

In the past some farmers have experienced difficulty in establishing stands of birdsfoot trefoil in renovated pastures. Before renovating and seeding, soil samples should be taken to determine lime, phosphate and potash needs. If possible, it is suggested that the old permanent sod be plowed and seeded to spring oats. At the time of oats seeding it is strongly urged that birdsfoot be band seeded at the rate of about 5 or 6 pounds of certified Empire or Viking seed and 2 pounds of timothy per acre. Years of experience have indicated that if trefoil is band seeded and the oats are removed by pasturing or clipping, excellent stands almost always result.

Chemical renovation is the newest method for establishing trefoil. Five - ten pounds of Dalapon per acre applied to old bluegrass sods in September or October will control competition from bluegrass and weeds the following spring. Band seed as soon as possible in the spring after disking the seed bed. The first summer the new trefoil should not be grazed by the dairy herd.

Band seeding, using phosphate fertilizer, is strongly recommended. However, do not fail to inoculate trefoil seed with trefoil inoculum, and use twice the recommended amount. Pasture or clip the seeding as soon as weeds or the companion crop starts to shade the young trefoil plants. Graze very lightly the first year. If unable to fence the area, spread manure to prevent over grazing.

A little special effort is required to obtain a vigorous stand of birdsfoot trefoil.
However, the extra effort insures a permanent legume that will provide feed for livestock and nitrogen for bluegrass for many years. Even in this day of so-called cheap commercial nitrogen, trefoil will do the job for less than half the cost.

**Fertility**

Soil fertility requirements of birdsfoot differs little from other common agricultural legumes.

**Use**

Birdsfoot trefoil will provide cheap gains for beef cattle on permanent type pastures. There are no known cases of bloat caused by trefoil, and it is equal to alfalfa in feeding value. Feeding values often exceed alfalfa because it does not lose its succulence nor does the protein content decline as quickly as does that of alfalfa. In many experiments and many years use at Miller-Purdue Farm it has produced enough feed for about an average of two yearling steers an acre per season. It produced 120 pounds more beef an acre than straight fertilized bluegrass.