

Tree Lucerne for Poultry

By Barry O'Donoghue

Tree lucerne can become the poultry keeper's best friend. It is a robust fast-growing tree that can be used as a windbreak, for shade in runs and as a source of green pickings all year round.

Known botanically as *Chamaecytisus palmensis*, it is generally called tree lucerne or tagasaste. An introduced legume species, it is now well established throughout the temperate regions of WA, SA, NSW, Vic and Tas. Its major attributes include drought tolerance and fast growth and its foliage composition is nutritionally similar to top quality alfalfa.

Utilising Tree Lucerne

Because the plant responds extremely well to regular pruning for the first couple of years, this can be taken advantage of in several ways. The prunings can be taken to the birds and tied to the fence or just thrown on the ground to allow the birds to peck off the leaves. This is known as the cut and carry method and is ideal where birds are kept in small runs and are not allowed out to range together, as when stud breeding.

A small hedge can be planted close to the exterior of any enclosure, allowing branches to grow through the wire. This will provide constant supplementary feed for poultry housed in the enclosure. This method would especially suit geese, allowing them controlled access. Geese would be very destructive to growing tree lucerne and should only be allowed free access to well-established trees.

Isolated plantings are perfect in free-

range areas provided young trees are protected from enthusiastic scratching around the roots and also from over-eating while plants are still young. A netting guard that prevents birds squeezing through (they can get trapped) would offer appropriate protection. Shelter as well as protection from aerial predators are two benefits to be gained from planting trees in open areas.

The nutritional make-up of tree lucerne should also be considered. It provides a good source of calcium and phosphorous plus the usual vitamins and minerals associated with legumes. It also has high digestibility and the metabolisable energy levels make the fodder very palatable. Best of all though, tree lucerne averages 18–22% crude protein, peaking at 28%. This gives the foliage a composition similar to best quality alfalfa.

Growing Details

Tree lucerne is versatile in that it can handle climatic conditions as diverse as those found in coastal regions as well as inland terrain, and from the hot westerly belt to the cool tablelands. Also, it has the capacity to grow in a wide range of soil conditions.

It prefers sandy surfaced soils, but is grown successfully on laterite, limestone, loam, gravel and deep coastal well fertilised sands. Preferring a pH that ranges from 4.8 to 6.5, it has been planted in alkaline soils to 8.5, but growth and production are retarded.

Prolonged water logging or constantly wet soils are unsuitable so avoid planting where these occur. Raised beds are a practical solution to ensure this species gets good drainage.



Seedlings are frost tender though the plants are hardy once established. It is best to transplant after the last frost each year so the growing plant is around 70cm to 1m by the first frost the following year. In the case of very heavy frosts, young plants may need protection for the first frost season.

Although tree lucerne is drought hardy, young plants may need watering in the first 12–18 months just as most native seedlings do. Established plants can get by with natural rainfall provided your area receives a minimum annual fall of around 350mm.

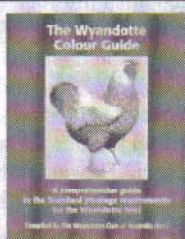
For enquiries on tree lucerne contact Barry O'Donoghue, phone/fax (02) 4869 5141 or email: odono@bigpond.com ❖

NITROGEN FIXING

Tree lucerne is a legume, which means it fixes nitrogen into the soil and so reduces requirements for added fertiliser. To develop into a true legume, bacteria (namely *Rhizobium* spp) need to be present and so it is vital to inoculate the plant with this. Root nodules are formed in which the bacteria grow and fix nitrogen from the air. Seedling tree lucerne that has already been inoculated with the desired bacterium can be purchased.

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