

Try Tree Lucerne

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Because lots of regions have had generous rain, this year might be a good time to get fodder trees in. You cannot go past tree lucerne (tagasaste) as a hardy, highly nutritious, fast growing fodder species. All livestock, including cattle, sheep, goats, alpacas and even poultry will graze this green feed with zest.

BENEFITS OF A LEGUME

Tree lucerne is a legume, which means it fixes nitrogen into the soil and so has reduced requirements for added fertiliser. Nitrogen is needed by all vegetation and is an essential component of protein. It is required in high amounts for active growth, particularly for young leaves and root tips. As a result of the nitrogen fixing ability of this species, all surrounding vegetation benefits from its planting.

For your tree lucerne to develop into a true legume, bacterium, namely *Rhizobium* spp., needs to be present. This causes formation of root nodules which are necessary for nitrogen fixation. Seedlings which have been inoculated can be obtained and are highlighted by improved vigour and health with significant increased yields.

EXCELLENT ANIMAL FODDER

The foliage of this plant has a protein composition similar to the best quality lucerne (alfalfa). It averages 18 – 22 percent crude protein, peaking at 28 percent. The shrub also provides a good source of calcium and phosphorous along with the usual vitamins and minerals associated with legumes.

GROWING CONDITIONS

Once seedlings are established, in about 18 months on average, natural rainfall will sustain them provided you are in an area with a yearly minimum of 350 millimetres. Mature plants have survived up to eight months without rainfall. But like native seedlings, tree lucerne requires some attention for the initial 12 – 18 months and watering on

very hot days.

Seedlings are frost tender so wait until the threat of frost has passed before planting out. Once established they are frost hardy. In frost-prone areas, plant after the last frost of the season and then by the time the first frost of next season arrives, plants will be between 70 and 100 centimetres and should withstand the onslaught. Protection is recommended for the first season if particularly heavy frosts are experienced.

WINDBREAK/SHADE SHELTER

Tree lucerne provides an excellent windbreak if planted between one to two metres apart. Shade or wind protection can be achieved quickly as tree lucerne grows at a rate in excess of one metre per year for four or five years. When pruned either manually or by animals it will regenerate at the same rate.

Tree lanes are the most effective way of providing sheltered paddocks, but spasmodic plantings throughout paddocks are also useful. Some farmers prefer the corner system, planting the seedlings in particular paddock corners to counter prevailing winds.

ADAPTABLE NEEDS

This species has the capacity to grow well in a wide range of soils from clay to sandy textures. It prefers sandy surfaced soils, but thrives on laterites, limestones, loams, gravels and well-fertilised deep coastal sands. Preferred pH ranges from 4.8 to 6.5. It has been planted in alkaline soils to 8.5, however, growth and production is retarded. Tree lucerne is not a species to endure constantly wet soils or prolonged water logging. Raised beds should be utilised if there is a likelihood of poor drainage. Healthier stronger plants will result from well-drained soil.

The plant is not fussy about climate conditions and can handle the environment from the hot westerly belt to the cool tablelands, from inland terrain to vast coastal regions.



MAKE USE OF THIS SPECIES

With a suitable climate and conditions, the evergreen tree lucerne will grow throughout most of the year, making it ideal for backup or supplementary feed when regular pastures need a rest or are depleted. Animals can be let into fenced-off areas for browsing and grazing or prunings can be taken to the animals. The estimated average of any matter consumed daily by an animal, say an alpaca, on good pasture is around 2.5 percent of the body weight of the animal. Using this assumption, an animal weighing 60 kilograms would consume around 1.5 kilograms. Each shrub will produce about 11 kilograms of edible dry matter annually. Fresh green material averages around 40 kilograms per shrub: these figures are conservative as much higher yields have been reported.

Growing tree lucerne has a host of benefits, not the least being that stock love it because it is highly palatable. If you have farmstock, you will want to get started now.

For more info on tree lucerne contact Barry O'Donoghue, ph/fax: 02-4869-5141. ☛