Growing Sainfoin for Forage

Area of Adaptation

Sainfoin (Onobrychis viciifolia) is well adapted to the dry calcareous soils of the northern Rocky Mountain region. Sainfoin is a nonbloating legume suited for use in dryland areas for hay or pasture in combination with drought-tolerant grasses. Studies in Montana have shown sainfoin to be suitable for production in dryland hay production and to have potential for use in range interseeding. The nonbloating characteristic is its major advantage over alfalfa, which will produce more than sainfoin wherever in Oregon alfalfa can be grown. Sainfoin is not generally recommended for use in Oregon.

Varieties

Eski sainfoin was selected from sainfoin introduced from Turkey in 1952. Seed was planted at the eastern Montana experiment station; seed was collected and increased from surviving plants. In 1964, this seed increase was released as Eski. Remont was released in 1971 by the Montana station. Melrose was licensed in Canada in 1969. Both Remont and Melrose are earlier in maturity and recover more rapidly after cutting than Eski.

Establishment

Establish sainfoin in the spring to allow germination and adequate growth before the dry summer period and to assure good winter survival. Sainfoin seed ¼ to ½ inch deep in a prepared seedbed immediately after inoculate it with the proper Rhizobium. When you are planting in dryland range, you may plant sainfoin in 20-inch-wide strips that are 5 feet apart. This range scalping and interseeding has resulted in establishment on harsh sites where conventional seeding methods are not successful.

Fertility pH Requirements

Sainfoin is difficult to nodulate, and ineffective nodulation has been reported in several studies. The pH and drainage requirements of sainfoin are similar to those of alfalfa. However, when you use it as a hay crop in dryland areas, yield from one or two cuttings will be low. For this reason, recommendations for fertilization based upon OSU Fertilizer Guides 18 and 20 for alfalfa will be too high. When you use sainfoin as pasture, OSU Fertilizer Guides for irrigated pasture (1, 21, 38, 58) provide more than adequate levels of nutrients for dryland areas.

Management

Sainfoin does not tolerate frequent defoliation when used as pasture. Use a rotational system that allows the recovery to an early bloom state of maturity for pasture or hay.

For use as a sheep feed, graze sainfoin before it reaches 18 inches. When you manage it this way, even sheep unaccustomed to sainfoin will graze it completely. If you allow sainfoin to become more mature, sheep will eat only the top and leaves, leaving the stems.
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