

VETCH IN THE MALLEE

Jay Cummins
District Agronomist
South Australian Department of Primary Industries

Introduction

Vetch has provided many farmers in our district with the opportunity to incorporate an instant grain legume or pasture crop into their cropping rotation. Vetch has proved to provide a great deal of versatility and performance, even when seasonal conditions seem to be going "against the grain".

Management - the key to success

It's not quite as simple as "just sowing and adding water" to obtain an instant bulk of legume. Vetch requires a reasonable amount of care and monitoring, in order to maximise the benefits that it has to offer in our cropping rotations. Management skills used in the growing of vetch don't happen by accident, but by good management, plenty of trial and error, and in some instances failures.

Vetch in the Rotation

Vetch has been incorporated into the more intensive type cropping rotations in our district. Vetch has the ability to provide worthwhile grazing, as well as the options of hay and/or grain production. In the higher rainfall districts of the Mallee, medic based pastures have not persisted for a number of reasons. These include, herbicide usage, general grazing management, and cropping intensities. Under the wider cropping rotations and the lower rainfall districts receiving less than 350 mm, medics still fill an extremely valuable role in our current farming systems.

Vetch Management

For vetch, what you sow is what you get - low sowing rates - poorer stands. Most farmers recommend that you sow as much seed as you can afford. As a general rule, in hay mixes 20 - 30 kg/ha of both oat and vetch seed is required. For seed production 25 - 35 kg/ha are desirable levels that should be sown. Weeds can be a problem in vetch. You need to have broadleaf weeds under control in paddocks prior to launching into a major vetch program. There are a number of herbicides available, with diuron being the cheapest and most widely used. Diuron is applied as post-sowing, pre-emergent. It should not be used on the lighter sandy rises, but restricted to the productive mallee loams. Rates of application range from 800 ml/ha up to 1.2 l/ha, with the higher rates used on the heavier wheat growing country.

A counter argument to growing of vetch has been "am I sowing a weed?" Well, yes you are when it comes to the following cereal crop. In general there are adequate herbicides which will allow the vetch to be controlled in the following cereal. The variety Namoi can be a particular problem with its level of hardseeds, when compared with soft seeded varieties such as Blanchfleur and Languedoc. Vetch can be a problem if you are growing other grain legume crops, with no herbicide products providing control in-crop selectively.

Insect management is an important consideration. Watch out for Red Legged Earthmite early in the season, particularly on varieties such as Blanchfleur and Languedoc. Cow pea aphid can also be a problem in vetch stands, once again Blanchfleur and Languedoc being most at risk. Control is very cost effective. Heliothis (or native budworm) is a threat to all varieties, with Languedoc at least risk due to its earlier maturity.

Pure Seed Important

When growing vetch for the first time, it is important to ensure that seed is pure, and not contaminated with other varieties, particularly if the vetch is going to be fed to pigs. Only Blanchfleur and Languedoc are suitable for pig rations. Blanchfleur seed can be easily distinguishable from other varieties by its bright orange seed when split. If other yellow/beige split seeds are found, you know that the sample is not entirely pure.

Beware of the potential threat of introducing weeds onto your property. No vetch can be purchased as certified seed in S.A. Buy seed locally from a neighbour if possible. If doubtful about the supply of the seed, have the seed tested for the presence of weed seeds.

Vetch Varieties

The four most common varieties are Namoi, Blanchfleur, Languedoc and Popany.

Namoi

This variety provides good persistence on the lighter sands, and produces excellent hay yields (due to its late maturity) when grown in an oat mix. As previously mentioned, the carry over of hard seeds can be a concern in following crops. Seed is considerably more expensive in comparison to other varieties.

Blanchfleur

The maturity of Blanchfleur is mid way between that of Namoi and Languedoc. As a result of this Blanchfleur provides greater versatility in terms of use as either a hay or seed crop. Seed is readily available, and reasonably cheap. This variety is becoming increasingly popular throughout the Southern Mallee.

Languedoc

A very early maturing variety, ensuring seed production in most years. Hay production is only ordinary, due to its early maturity. Is being grown less in the Mallee, replaced by Blanchfleur.

Popany

Versatile variety in hay mixes, seed production is limiting in the lower rainfall districts, due to a late flowering period. Requires good seasonal conditions in order to perform in the Mallee.

For further reading refer to the publication 'Growing Vetch', written by Barry Bull and Alan Mayfield. This is available from the Murray Bridge Department of Agriculture.

Editor's note: if you are interested in obtaining a copy of 'Growing Vetch' please contact Felicity Pedley, Co-ordinator BCDS on (054) 92 2735.

Jay Cummins
Senior District Agronomist
South Australian Department of Primary Industries

Phone: (085) 76 3345

REMEMBER: BCDS Field Day - 14 September