USDA United States Department of Agriculture

Illinois Grazing Manual Fact Sheet

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Field Peas for Forage

General Information

The Field pea is an annual cool-season grain legume crop. There are two main types of field peas. One type has normal leaves and vine lengths of 3′ - 6′; the second type is semi-leafless and has modified leaflets reduced to tendrils, resulting in shorter vine lengths of 2′ - 4′. Field peas are well adapted to cool, semiarid climates. Field pea seeds germinate at a soil temperature of 40°F. Field peas can withstand heavy frost once established. They do not grow well in hot weather. Optimal growing temperatures are between 60 and 70°F. Field peas prefer well limed soils with a pH near 7.0 but are reported to tolerate soil pH as low as 4.2 and as high as 8.3.

Use

Field peas can be used as a cover crop, green manure, or forage and hay and silage. Hay is good quality, but peas are more succulent than vetches and more difficult to cure. Regrowth after mowing or grazing is poor. Field peas are often planted in mixtures with cereal grains for grazing or silage. Field peas grown with barley, oats, triticale, or wheat provide excellent livestock forage. The cereal crop protects the soil during winter when field pea growth is slow, and provides a support for vines to climb, keeping pea vegetation off the ground where it is more likely to rot. Field peas can produce between 1 - 3 tons of dry matter per acre.

Management

Field peas can be grown on a wide range of soil types, from light sandy to heavy clay. Field peas have moisture requirements similar to those of cereal grains. However, field peas have lower tolerance to waterlogged soil conditions than cereal grains. Poorly drained soils should be avoided when growing field peas.

Field peas are most often grown on re-crop following small grains. Being a legume, field peas will fix the majority of required nitrogen if the seed is properly inoculated. Residual nitrogen will also be present for the succeeding crop.

Field peas can be grown in a no-till or conventional-till cropping system. Field pea seed requires considerably higher amounts of moisture for germination than cereal grains. Avoid excessive tillage in the spring to avoid drying out the seedbed. Field peas should be seeded in early spring, April to mid-May, so that flowering will occur during potentially cooler weather. The seeding rate depends on seed size. Field pea varieties will range from 1,600 to 5,000 seeds per pound. A plant population of 300,000 plants per acre or 7 - 8 plants per square foot is recommended. For optimal results, drill the seed into a smooth seedbed at a depth of 1 - 2 inches.

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