

ALFALFA – A ‘LIFESAVER’ FOR YOUR GARDEN

By Jolene Adams

Alfalfa - a flowering plant in the pea family, also known as lucerne or lucerne grass or masal, a legume, alfalfa root nodules contain bacteria with the ability to 'fix' nitrogen producing a high-protein feed regardless of available nitrogen in the soil.

Farmers have known for thousands of years that sowing a field one year and then leaving it to grow grass and weeds another year helps the soil to stay fertile for a long, long time. Farmers that churn out a crop every year eventually kill their soil, since the crop continually absorbs specific nutrients and leaves nothing behind when the ground is scalped and all the vegetation is taken away.

In Roman times, alfalfa was 'discovered' (well, it had been there all the time, but they never tried to grow it on purpose), and it was grown in the winter months and turned under to rot in the soil until the spring rains softened up the ground and the spring crop could be sown.

Alfalfa was fed to livestock and it was noticed how beneficial it was, how fat and sleek the animals grew, and how it took less alfalfa to achieve the same results as cereal grains. Alfalfa became the forage of choice, and was introduced into the Americas in Colonial times.

Of course, gardeners in 'olden days' used 'green cover crops' as mulches and turned in the stubble from harvesting the vegetable gardens and kept the soil going year after year. But about the mid-twentieth century America fell in love with commercially available fertilizers. How easy! How cheap!! No more chopping, mowing, baling, spreading and turning under - - just sprinkle, sprinkle, sprinkle. They forgot the lessons of thousands of years of gardening experience - - - and they began to notice that soil fertility was diminishing.

Again - alfalfa to the rescue! As a widely grown forage crop, alfalfa is readily available as dust or meal, pellets, nuggets (compressed biscuits of dried material), and hay and can be made into a stinky, sludgy 'tea' for the garden. For the big gardens alfalfa hay is widely used. A lot of hay bales get spilled off the truck and split open, or the bale breaks apart - so the waste material is spread on the garden as a mulch.

For the smaller garden it is far easier to buy pellets at the Feed Store. These are the pellets used for feeding horses and cows - not rabbits or guinea pigs. Rabbit food from the pet store will contain additives that draw ants! The pellets are easier to handle than alfalfa meal or dust. You wouldn't want to breathe in alfalfa dust anyway – any kind of dust not too good for you.

Besides being a sustainable crop, alfalfa contains nutrients that roses love! And the critters in the soil also enjoy munching on alfalfa - which incorporates it into the soil as an amendment, helping the soil stay light and fluffy and full of nourishment for the flowers growing in it.

One of the 'potent' ingredients of alfalfa is an alcohol called tricontanol, a powerful plant growth regulator. So the alfalfa that is rotting away in your garden is actually 'trickle charging' the growth of your roses. Alfalfa is very high in vitamins, plus Nitrogen, Phosphorous, Potassium,

Calcium, Magnesium and other valuable minerals. It also includes sugars, starches, proteins, fiber and 16 amino acids.

One way of using alfalfa pellets in the garden is to sprinkle it around the root area of your roses. You will notice that if it gets wet it starts to look like a bunch of wooly caterpillars. Most folks scratch it into the soil or cover it with mulch so they don't have to look at it.

Another way to use alfalfa is to soak 6 cups of alfalfa pellets in a 20-gallon trash can full of water - with a lid on it! This stuff will break down and start to ferment - then stink. Stir it a bit (use a broom handle) and after 3 to 5 days you have alfalfa tea - a great spring tonic for the garden. Dip out the liquid and spread it around the roots of your roses. Water it in. When you get to the sludge, add more water and let it sit for another 5 days, then dip it out again. The remains from the second batch should be put into the compost bin or spread under the roses and turned under.

A third way is to use 'recycled' alfalfa - straight from the rabbit or guinea pig and into the compost - then as a soil amendment for the garden after the compost is well rotted.

Varmints can be attracted to alfalfa - mice, possums, sometimes the dog - but if it is turned under and watered in, they no longer hunt for it.

I really can't think of a reason not to use alfalfa, as long as you use it correctly.

Sources:

University of California, Davis - <http://alfalfa.ucdavis.edu/>

University of Wisconsin - <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/crops/uwforage/alfalfa.htm>

Alfalfa Alliance - <http://www.alfalfa.org/>

University of Missouri - <http://extension.missouri.edu/xplor/agguides/crops/g04550.htm>