



# Forage Identification and Use Guide

*Jimmy Henning and Garry Lacefield, Extension Forage Specialists, University of Kentucky;  
Ken Johnson, District Conservationist, Natural Resources Conservation Service;  
and David Ditsch, Extension Agronomist, University of Kentucky*



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This publication is a joint project of the  
Kentucky Forage and Grassland Council,  
the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture,  
and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

It was made possible by a grant from the  
Kentucky Department of Agriculture,  
Billy Ray Smith, Commissioner  
and the USDA Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems  
(Award Number 00-52101-9629).



# Contents

|                                         |    |
|-----------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction .....                      | 5  |
| Morphology of Grasses and Legumes ..... | 5  |
| Forage Identification and Use .....     | 5  |
| Alfalfa .....                           | 6  |
| Bermudagrass .....                      | 7  |
| Big Bluestem .....                      | 8  |
| Birdsfoot Trefoil .....                 | 9  |
| Bromegrass .....                        | 10 |
| Caucasian Bluestem .....                | 11 |
| Crimson Clover .....                    | 12 |
| Eastern Gamagrass .....                 | 13 |
| Indiangrass .....                       | 14 |
| Kentucky Bluegrass .....                | 15 |
| Lespedeza, Annual .....                 | 16 |
| Lespedeza (Sericea), Perennial .....    | 17 |
| Orchardgrass .....                      | 18 |
| Red Clover .....                        | 19 |
| Reed Canarygrass .....                  | 20 |
| Ryegrass, Annual .....                  | 21 |
| Ryegrass, Perennial .....               | 22 |
| Sweetclover .....                       | 23 |
| Switchgrass .....                       | 24 |
| Tall Fescue .....                       | 25 |
| Timothy .....                           | 26 |
| White (Ladino) Clover .....             | 27 |

# Introduction

Forage crops occupy approximately 7 million acres in Kentucky. They provide most of the feed for beef, dairy, horse, sheep, and wildlife. In addition, forage crops play a critical role in soil conservation, water quality, and air quality. Many publications are available with detailed information about species and varieties grown in Kentucky. The purpose of this publication is to provide both agronomic and identification information on several forage grasses and legumes. Additional material is available in each county through the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service as well as from the Natural Resources Conservation Service, wildlife organizations, livestock organizations, the Kentucky Forage and Grassland Council, and many industry groups.

## Morphology of Grasses and Legumes

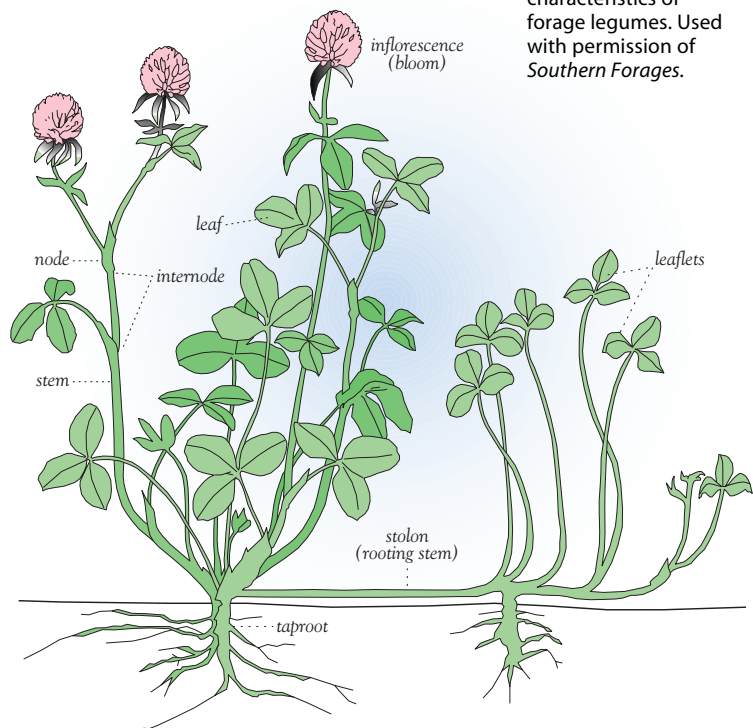
Understanding the general structure, or morphology, of forage grasses and legumes aids in their identification. Generalized drawings of a legume and a grass are shown in Figures 1 and 2. These drawings are composites and contain characteristics of several different legumes or grasses.

## Forage Identification and Use

To properly manage and understand a forage system—whether it is used for hay, pasture, wildlife, conservation, or some combination of uses—it is important to be able to identify the species present and understand their establishment, management, and productivity. The following section includes photographs and descriptions of the major forage grasses and legumes for Kentucky and their definitive characteristics as well as some general guidelines for their establishment and use. Some characteristics and advantages are common to all grasses or legumes. For example, nearly all legumes are able to convert atmospheric nitrogen into plant-available nitrogen through *Rhizobium* bacteria in root nodules. Erosion control is a good example of a common benefit of most grasses. Such common traits will not be listed specifically for individual grasses or legumes unless they are major distinguishing uses or characteristics.

Grasses and legumes in this guide are listed alphabetically. The common name of the species is shown at the top of the page, followed by the scientific name in italics. Harvest dates are approximate.

**Figure 1.**  
A generalized drawing showing the characteristics of forage legumes. Used with permission of Southern Forages.



**Figure 2.**  
A generalized drawing showing the characteristics of forage grasses. Used with permission of Southern Forages.

