

WHITE CLOVER IN LOW MAINTENANCE LAWNS

White Dutch clover—is it right for your low maintenance lawn?

White Dutch clover was once a staple of lawns here in the Northeast. Low growing and green through the summer droughty period, it provided nitrogen for the grasses in the lawn. Widespread use of fertilizers and herbicides beginning in the 1950's changed that. This once popular lawn component is now widely regarded as a weed or as a forage crop.

But white clover is making a comeback. Pesticide free zones in Canada are again using white clover for their lawns. It is growing in popularity here in the Northeast as well.

Many new houses in “exurbia,” beyond the suburbs, are putting in five-acre lawns and seeking minimal maintenance on them. Wells are common; concerns about potential leaching are sometimes heard, but many don't want to spend the resources for a high maintenance lawn or the time to fertilize/pesticide or mow it.

There are many kinds of clover but most are used for forage crops and are substantially taller than White Dutch. Among these forage types are: ‘Ladino,’ ‘New Zealand’ and ‘Alsike.’

White Dutch clover (also known as Shamrock or Irish clover):

- grows about four to eight inches high
- tolerates low mowing well
- spreads to fill in empty spaces
- stays green through droughty periods of summer
- tolerates dog urine
- provides nitrogen (up to 2 pounds of n/1000 square feet) for the other grasses in the lawn, eliminating the need to fertilize
- looks good especially if it is blended evenly throughout the lawn.

White Dutch clover is hard to find in area seed stores that specialize in conventional grasses. Many carry clover but don't know what kind. You may wind up with a higher growing clover than you want. White Dutch is readily available on the Internet. Search for white clover on almost any search engine and you'll get shopping choices. Outsidepride.com sells White Dutch clover in a 10-pound quantity for about \$25 (larger quantities available) and ships within 2 business days of the order. Seedland.com sells 50-pound bags. So look around for a source. But remember: WHITE DUTCH, THE LOW GROWING KIND.

White Dutch clover needs a bacterium inoculant for best growth. Some vendors sell seeds with it already in place. Some sell it separately. Ask before you buy.

If you are putting in a new lawn, add clover at a rate of two to four pounds/acre (0.7 to 1.4 ounces per 1,000 square feet) to your seed mix and stir it up well. A little goes a long way.

Overseeding can be done as “frost seeding” in early March when the soil is still honeycombed with frost. Do this early in the day while the soil contains frost. Delaying until mid-morning when the soil surface has become slippery will not be as effective. White Dutch can also be over seeded with conventional seedbed preparation techniques in either the early spring or August 15 to early September. Use twice the amount of seed as for a new lawn.

White Dutch clover is easily killed with conventional broadleaf herbicides. So if you want clover, you don't want to use broadleaf weed control products.

White Dutch clover attracts honeybees. If allergic reactions to bee stings are a concern, white clover is not for you. Also, clover stains in clothes are more difficult to launder out than grass stains.

Written by Ed Leonard, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County Intern, 7/2002.

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