

# The East London Garden Society

## Plant Facts

### Alfalfa



Alfalfa seems to have originated in south-central Asia, and was first cultivated in ancient Iran, being introduced to Greece in about 490 BC when the Persians invaded Greek territory. The ancient Greeks and Romans believed, probably correctly, that Alfalfa came from the Medes' land, in today's Iran. In ancient India, Ayurvedic texts prescribe the use of Alfalfa seeds and sprouts for improving blood cell production and its leaves and stem as a good source of protein and minerals.

In the 16th century, Spanish colonizers introduced Alfalfa to the Americas as fodder for their horses. In the North American colonies of the eastern US in the 18th century, it was called 'Lucerne' and many trials at growing it were made but generally, without successful results. Relatively little is grown in the south-eastern United States today. Lucerne is the name for Alfalfa in Britain, Australia, France and Germany.

Alfalfa seeds were imported to California from Chile in the 1850s. That was the beginning of a rapid and extensive introduction of the crop over the western United States and introduced the word 'Alfalfa' to the English language. Since North and South America now produce a large part of the world's output, the word 'Alfalfa' has been slowly entering other languages.

Alfalfa is a perennial forage legume which normally lives four to eight years, but can live more than twenty years, depending on variety and climate. The plant grows to a height of up to one metre, and has a deep root system, sometimes growing to a depth of more than fifteen metres to reach groundwater. Typically, the root system grows to a depth of two to three metres depending on subsoil constraints. This depth of root system, and production of crowns that store carbohydrates as an energy reserve, make it very resilient, especially to droughts.

Alfalfa is more drought-hardy than drought-tolerant, and the persistence of the plant also depends on the management of the land. Alfalfa is a small-seeded crop, and has a slowly growing seedling, but after several months of establishment, forms a tough crown at the top of the root system. This crown contains shoot buds that enable Alfalfa to regrow many times after being grazed or harvested.

Most parts of the Alfalfa plant are edible, such as the leaves and young shoots. Alfalfa sprouts can be added to various dishes for garnishing or used in place of salad greens.