

Fodder shrubs for goats - Tagasaste

There is no doubt that goats will supplement their diet by browsing on weeds, shrubs or trees whenever possible. In fact, given the choice, they often prefer poor quality scrub to good quality pasture. This is fine for farmers using goats primarily for weed and scrub control but can have a negative effect on such processes as reproductive performance, etc.

Some browse species have a high nutritional value, are highly favoured by goats and other livestock and would surely provide and excellent alternative food source during periods when pasture is in short supply.

Tagasaste (tree lucerne) is such a shrub, which is hardy and leguminous. In temperate climate it can provide heavy yields of nutritious green fodder for grazing animals which is highly palatable and protein rich (23% - 27% crude protein). Also it has only 18%-24% indigestible crude fibre and even when grown on poor coastal soils (properly fertilised) can maintain these protein levels.

Australian farmers now growing tagasaste are reporting these additional benefits:

- Shade and shelter for livestock during climate stress
- Wind and water erosion control
- Increased soil fertility through nitrogen fixation
- Reductions in water tables causing salinity problems
- Habitat for native birds that eat pasture and crop pests
- Green firebreaks around homesteads and along boundary fences
- Winter nectar for bees
- Reduced internal parasite problems as shrub fodder is browsed above pasture that harbours dung-borne worm eggs.

Many farmers are now following this revolution as soil salinity and soil acidity problems make browse shrubs a most sensible way to go in improving landcare.

Tagasaste will withstand long, dry periods and would survive well in drought-prone areas of Australia. It thrives on a variety of soil types, provided they are well drained and could increase the stock carrying capacity of

pastureland. It is an excellent feed for late pregnancy and early lactation when pasture is in short supply. It is also a good feed for young growing kids after weaning, particularly in the summer when pasture quality declines and is not toxic to livestock. In spite of its common name of "tree lucerne" it does not cause bloat.

Perhaps the biggest problem with tagasaste is that all parts of the plants are palatable including the bark. When prunings are fed to goats they rapidly devour the leaves, flowers and small branches before systematically stripped off the bark. No doubt if they were left browsing long enough in a stand of tagasaste, they would also remove bark and damage or destroy the plants. But the damage would probably be minimal if they were allowed into the crop only for short periods; just long enough to fill up on the most palatable portions (which appear to be the leaves). The taller branches could then be pruned and fed on the ground, either within the crop or in an adjacent paddock. Alternatively, cattle could be introduced to browse the higher levels. Tagasaste regrows rapidly after grazing or pruning and frequent harvesting will ensure that it remains bushy and at a manageable height.

Many farms have poorly productive waste areas or slopes, which could readily support a stand of tagasaste. Perhaps you could start on a small scale in such areas and experiment with different methods of browsing management before committing larger, more productive parts of your property. One recommendation is to plant the shrub in rows 5 meters apart with 2.5 metres between plants. At this rate 1 hectare would contain over 700 plants.

Surely it is time for goat farmers to look seriously at planting fodder crops such as tagasaste as an alternative source of high quality feed especially in areas with long dry summers.

From information provided by "Goat Health and Production" and University of Queensland.

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