

What's so special about lucerne hay?

What is lucerne hay? Lucerne is a legume crop primarily grown for stock feed and the highly nutritious seed (alfalfa sprouts). Legume crops like lucerne fix nitrogen for its own use. The nitrogen content of lucerne is amongst the highest in the plant kingdom in a slow release protein form. As mulch it provides a nutrient balance ideal for all plants.

Why not use chook poo? This table compares lucerne with pelletised poultry manure.

<i>Element</i>	<i>% in lucerne</i>	<i>% for roses</i>	<i>% in chook poo</i>
Nitrogen	3.5 -5.0	3.0 - 4.0	2.0
Phosphorus	0.3 - 0.6	0.2 - 0.4	2.8
Potassium	2.0 - 4.0	2.0 - 3.0	1.0
Sulphur	0.2 - 0.4	0.2 - 0.5	2.0
Calcium	1.0 -2.0	1.0 - 1.5	11.0
Magnesium	0.3 - 0.5	0.3 - 0.5	0.2

Note these nutrients are well balanced in lucerne hay, in addition:

- Lucerne is richer in nitrogen than chook poo, and richer in potassium, essential for fruit and flowers
- The nitrogen in lucerne is in a non-toxic slow release form, whereas chook poo is highly ammonia toxic and can cause serious damage to plants
- Calcium and phosphorus are in gross excess in chook poo materials and mushroom compost based products. These could cause a serious imbalance in the soil with an excess of calcium and phosphorus.

Advantages of using lucerne hay as mulch:

Other advantages of using lucerne as a mulch for most plants are:

- Weed suppression and moisture conservation, requiring 10 to 20% less watering
- Light colour means that heat is reflected, keeping the soil cooler in summer
- Research shows that lucerne can result in a stimulation of root growth, probably due to natural hormones in the lucerne hay, and a suppresser of root diseases in the soil
- Lucerne is great worm food and stimulates worm activity. Let the worms do the digging for you!

How to use lucerne hay:

Lucerne hay is available as hay bales or shredded in bags. With bales break off cakes of compressed pieces and spread on the soil 50-75mm thick in early spring. Shredded lucerne can be spread evenly over the soil to the same thickness. Top up in mid summer if necessary. Lucerne hay maintains soil fertility, but is not a replacement for regular plant feeding. For peak productivity in the fruit and vegetable garden supplement the natural nutrient levels of lucerne with a good quality plant food. It is recommended that this is applied a minimum of spring and autumn. The addition of old pulverised cow manure under the lucerne is an excellent combination. For new vegie gardens dig in shredded lucerne and old cow manure a few weeks before planting.

This information is brought to you by The Sydney Soil Testing Laboratories in conjunction with Cedric Bryant The Garden Designer

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