

Perennial peanut in public landscapes

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Published: Thursday, October 18, 2012 at 14:50 PM.

Traditionally, perennial or rhizoma peanut has been used as a forage crop in hay fields. However, this South American relative of the edible peanut may be used more in along roadsides and in landscapes in the near future.

In today's article, I'll share what researchers at the UF/IFAS North Florida Research and Education Center (NFREC) in Quincy have to say about the potential use of perennial peanut in public landscapes.

In addition to the great forage benefits, this subtropical legume has the potential to fill a variety of other landscape uses. Utilizing more perennial peanut in the landscape might help to reduce economic and environmental costs.

Once established, perennial peanut rarely, if ever, requires additional irrigation. Since this legume fixes nitrogen gas through its association with specific strains of bacteria, nitrogen fertilization is not required. This means less environmental impact from excessive water and fertilizer use, and in turn, less impact on our wallets.

Grown alone as a groundcover or mixed with grass sod, urban developers and transportation departments are assessing its use in public landscapes. Currently, the most commonly used roadside grass in the state is bahiagrass. Although bahiagrass is a tough sod that helps to reduce soil and water erosion, it requires frequent mowing to maintain a short stature.

Unfortunately, the repeated low cutting height and lack of fertilizer inputs may be weakening this plant, resulting in occasional stress-related die-back. As with bahiagrass, perennial peanut helps to minimize soil erosion, but its growing points are very close to the soil surface, making it more tolerant to a low cutting height. When grown in combination with grasses, it may also contribute to some of the nitrogen the grass needs. Additionally, it provides beauty to the landscape, with its dark green leaves and yellow-orange flowers.

Determining how well perennial peanut responds to being incorporated into established bahiagrass is the objective of a study at the NFREC. The study consists of two bahiagrass cultivars, either grown alone or with one of two different cultivars of perennial peanut. Besides measuring establishment and plant stand attributes, we are assessing water use and the potential for nutrient leaching. The next time you drive down Interstate 10 in Tallahassee (just west of the 199 exit to the state capital), keep a lookout for small perennial peanut plantings of one to two acres, along the north and south highway embankments. This demonstration is one of the many small signs that we are moving towards a more environmentally friendly and beautiful landscape.

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