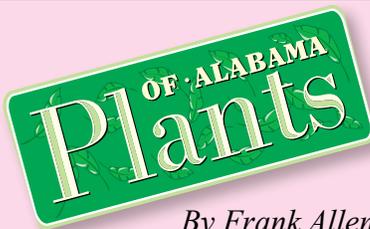




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The Truth about Lespedezas

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Lespedezas are plants that have been utilized by wildlife managers and soil conservationists for over 50 years. Now there is a debate about whether the lespedeza's benefits outweigh its problems. Exotic lespedezas were brought into the United States from Asia to assist with soil stabilization and to provide food for game birds such as the Northern bobwhite quail. Other lespedeza species are native to the United States and have been planted and managed to accomplish the same objectives as exotic lespedezas. A total of 13 different lespedezas grow in the Southeast consisting of two annuals, two shrubs, and nine perennials. Ten of these species are native and three are exotic. All belong to the legume family, meaning they produce a fruit-bearing pod similar to a pea or bean. While certain exotic lespedezas do provide cover and are an excellent food source for some wildlife, their ability to spread and dominate native plants should not be overlooked.

While Eastern cottontail, wild turkey, and ruffed grouse use the seeds and foliage from lespedezas, the plants are probably the most important seed producers for Northern bobwhite quail. White-tailed deer also prefer lespedezas during summer months. Contrary to popular reasoning, seed-eating songbirds rarely utilize lespedeza seeds.

Major drawbacks occur primarily with the two most commonly cultivated lespedeza species. Both lespedeza bicolor and sericea lespedeza were originally imported to the United States from Asia as ornamental plants. Later, they were used to inhibit erosion and provide food and cover for wildlife. The main issue surrounding these plants is that they are not

native and are out-competing beneficial native plants. They have become invasive, and once established are extremely difficult and expensive to control.

Prescribed burning, a practice used by woodland managers, actually causes bicolor to spread. Burning may kill the top of the plant, but re-sprouting will occur from the root. Even if herbicide is used as a foliar treatment, lespedeza bicolor seed can remain viable for years in the seed bank, making re-treatment inevitable.

Once an area has been invaded, dense stands of lespedeza bicolor develop, resulting in land that is difficult to access.

Sericea lespedeza, once thought to be beneficial, offers essentially no wildlife value other than cover. It will help stabilize soil when erosion is a problem, but why create another problem when different plant species will work? Sericea and bicolor are so problematic, many states have placed them on their noxious plant lists.

Although land managers, wildlife biologists, and soil conservationists continue to argue whether or not exotic lespedezas' assets are greater than

their liabilities, the answer is simple. Enhance, encourage, and manage the ten native lespedeza species found in southeastern habitats, instead of risking disaster with exotic species. ☪

Photo by James H. Miller, US Forest Service, Bugwood.org

