

## SAINFOIN

### *Onobrychis viciifolia* Scop.

Plant Symbol = ONVI

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Pullman Plant  
Materials Center



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#### Alternate Names

*Hedysarum onobrychis* L., *Onobrychis sativa* Lam.,  
*Onobrychis viciaefolia* Scop., holy grass

#### Uses

Sainfoin is nonbloating, and it is a preferred forage for cattle, sheep, deer and elk. They will concentrate their feeding on sainfoin even when other forages are readily available. Honey bees readily visit the pink flowers and sainfoin honey is of excellent quality. Sainfoin seed pods shatter in early fall and the nutritious seed is consumed by birds and rodents.

#### Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

#### Description

Sainfoin is an introduced perennial legume with many tall hollow stems, 60-80 cm or more. Its leaves are compound with 5-14 pairs of oval-shaped leaflets and a single leaflet at the tip. Sainfoin has conelike clusters fragrant, pinkish- red flowers on the end of long stalks. Seed pods are flat and contain a single dark olive green, brown, or black seed, 4-6 mm. There are 18,000 seeds/pound.

#### Adaptation and Distribution

Sainfoin is adapted to areas of the inland Pacific Northwest that receive at least 12 inches of annual precipitation. It is also adapted to much of the Northern Rocky Mountains, Northern Great Plains, and Northern Great Basin. Sainfoin was introduced to North America from Eurasia. Sainfoin grows well on a variety of well-drained soils and performs better than alfalfa on cold soils.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Website.

#### Establishment

Sainfoin seed is quite large but must not be seeded deeper than  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch. The seed takes up moisture rapidly and germinates quickly. Seed must be inoculated with the appropriate rhizobium and planted into a firm, well-packed seedbed. Seed should be planted in the spring for best emergence.

#### Management

It should not be planted next to shelterbelts because the trees and shrubs will suffer from indiscriminate browsing and other damage by deer and elk. Unconsumed seed will readily germinate on a moist soil surface so adequate residue should left on the field to maintain moist conditions at the soil surface and promote natural recruitment. Allowing the plants to periodically make seed will increase stand longevity.

#### Pests and Potential Problems

Sainfoin is subject to crown rot and the stands may not persist more than 5-6 years in areas subject to heavy infection.

**Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

‘Eski’ was developed for pasture usage and does not regrow well after the first clipping/grazing.

‘Melrose’ was developed in Canada and has better regrowth. ‘Remont’ is an older variety and has largely been replaced by ‘Melrose’.

**Prepared By & Species Coordinator:**

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

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