

# **Ontario Forage Masters Competition**

## **JOHN BEER, ONTARIO FORAGE MASTER 1998 TO SPEAK AT ONTARIO FORAGE COUNCIL.**



**THIS COMPETITION IS JOINTLY SPONSORED BY OSCIA AND**

John Beer, R R 4, Arthur, ON N0G 1A0, Wellington County, earned the 1998 ONTARIO FORAGE MASTER title at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. This Ontario winner will speak at the Ontario Forage Council annual meeting, November 25, 1998 in Guelph.

In 1998, producers from twenty one counties became involved in the county competitions, winners of which told their stories at the Provincial competition.

The Ontario winner has the opportunity to participate in the American Forage and Grassland Council program to identify a Forage Spokesperson for the year. Ontario producers have taken their fair share of recognition in that program. The 1999 AFGC spokesperson competition will be held in Omaha, Nebraska in March.

The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, Novartis Seeds and Agri-Food Labs are the current sponsors.

Forage Masters provide inspiration for all to re-examine forage practices and search out innovative and improved ways of making forages reach their productive potential, economically, environmentally and sustainably in Ontario agriculture.

### ***TRANSCRIPT OF PRESENTATION. John Beer, R R 4, Arthur, ON .***

My wife Sharon and I farm 240 acres about forty kilometres north of Guelph. Until this summer we were in the dairy business, but when I reached that 'freedom 55' status, we decided to go the heifer route and cash cropping. It's OK to be 55 to-day and that excites me, but there is something that excites me even more and that is to drive up and down the roads of rural Ontario and see a beautiful vigorous, healthy, lush stand of forages and most of all, a field of alfalfa, so deservedly called 'The Queen of the Crops'.

On our farm, forage growing starts with the soil. It is essential the soil is treated as a food bank of essential nutrients that are soluble enough to be available to that tiny legume seedling. They must be available as well to the mature plant so it can withstand the long, hard, cold and icy winters, withstand the droughts of the summer, the rains of the fall and the rains of the spring.

To prepare for seeding of productive forages, the first thing we had to do was tile drain, tile drain and tile drain to get rid of excess water in the clay loam on our farm.

In preparation for establishing a stand of alfalfa, which is the most important thing we do, we take soil tests every two years, to make sure we are on top of the nutrients there.

If you dig up a little alfalfa root, or a big alfalfa root and you see nice healthy pink nodules on that root, you know those nodules are helping by taking in nitrogen from the air. Since the air is about 70% nitrogen, we do not have to purchase nitrogen for that alfalfa stand.

Sometimes we can get into hardpan in the soil. Alfalfa roots going off at right angles to the main root, indicates there is a hardpan problem. We like to put alfalfa into the rotation every three years and keep the stand for 3 to five years, depending on our crop rotation needs. This reduces soil hardpans.

When the stand has served its time, we manure it and plow that crop down after treating it with a litre and a half of Roundup. It seems to help in keeping our soil friable as we want to do.

Preparing a seedbed is important. We like to have it very fine. We like to plant that little seed one half inch below the surface, compact it to give good seed to soil contact for moisture uptake to speed germination.

We always choose Certified alfalfa seed and plant a multi-leaf variety that has winterhardiness and disease resistance. We don't find it economical at all to purchase a cheap, non- registered seed. Buy the best and you are likely to get the best in the crop as well.

We plant 15 pounds of seed per acre. The 12 pounds of alfalfa and three pounds of timothy give an 80/20 mix that provides 165 plants per square foot. Sometimes it is sown with the combination drill, using a companion grain crop at a reduced rate of planting. Other times it is sown directly, and a forage harvest taken off later that fall. If a companion crop is used, we like to leave a good six inch stubble to act an air mattress - to serve as a breathing, respiratory system allowing the plants to breathe through snow and ice in that hard first winter. In established stands we always leave a good top in the fall and of course we never cut in September in our short season area.

When it comes to harvest we move out there in early bud to mid bud for haylage and we find reliable equipment is important. When harvest comes we work as long as we can, because there is no extra help. We go to the wall to get that crop in top shape. When it comes to hay we try and handle it as bales - round and square. We do leave some a little later as our labour is not quick enough to handle it all at optimum stage. We do strive for a protein content of 20% an ADF of 30% and NDF of 40% and we will end up with an RFV of 170.-200. At that range, the livestock is getting optimum value of that feed - the best TDN value that you can get, therefore the best milk production, at the most efficient cost.

And of course after harvest we spread forages with recommended rates of fertilizer, commonly using 0-11-45.

2<sup>nd</sup>. Economically. Once the long term crop is established it can be productive for 3 to 6 years. It is a crop that can be fed, or sold. There are big bucks available in selling alfalfa or other hay to-day. It is a versatile crop.

3<sup>rd</sup>. Environmentally. If we are to be stewards of the land God has left us with, we should try and take care of it. If we use crops like alfalfa it will reduce wind and soil erosion to almost zero.

4<sup>th</sup>. Aesthetically. Forage looks good as you travel the countryside. Nothing smells better in June than beautifully cut alfalfa and there is nothing that smells and looks better in the stable and the barn than well cured hay.

Forages are the backbone for most livestock operations. They are soil builders. They are soil preservers. They do it all naturally. Quality forage produces quality milk and quality livestock. Forages on our farm are here to-day and here to stay.

Trans genetic alfalfa research is suddenly transferring genes from other plants to alfalfa which will give more durability, more profit, more winter hardiness and more disease resistance. It is going to put us on the cutting edge of the future in alfalfa growing business.

Biotechnology is the buzzword of to-day. It is going to affect what we grow, and the way we grow it. Even the medical profession is looking at alfalfa for cures for cancer. The pharmaceutical industry is looking at it big time for cures for cancer. They already have developed bladder infection cures from ingredients of alfalfa.

We have the right product. We have the right practical skills. We have the right people skills to do a great job. I challenge all the forage masters here to-day to produce, promote and be proud of the crop we grow the best. We have the most productive, efficient, versatile crop grown in our province.

Q. How do you evaluate yield in forage stands? A. In the field we evaluate by the density of the stems and how far down the stems the leaves go.