

# Purple vetch better than hairy

**H**AIRY vetch has a new and improved cousin that's more adapted for northern climes and organic uses north of Maryland. The "Purple Bounty" variety was developed and released by USDA's Agricultural Research Service at Beltsville, Md.

The variety is much more winter-hardy and should expand use of vetch throughout the Northeast, suggests Tom Devine, a geneticist and breeder with Sustainable Agricultural Systems Laboratory of the Agricultural Research Service. It survives winters as far north as upstate New York.

Look for it this summer in test plots across the Northeast. Limited seed quantities should be available for planting in 2008 with commercial quantities available in 2009, adds Devine. It was first released to the Cornell Ag Experiment Station, Penn State's Ag Experiment Station and the Rodale Institute at Kutztown, Pa.

## Where it shines

Hairy vetch is a fall-seeded winter cover crop used to reduce weed competition



**BOUNTIFUL HAIRY:** ARS geneticist Tom Devine bred this purple vetch variety to survive Northeast winters and flower early.

## Warmth, humidity hurt forage seed

**K**EEP your seed dry — and cool — if you expect good results with forage seed left over from last fall or this spring. Most forage seeds don't store well beyond one year, and they don't like warm, humid weather, notes Marvin Hall, Extension forage agronomist at Penn State.

Seed is easy to store during winter. But now, with temperature and humidity rising, it's time to make sure those bags are stored in a cool, dry locations — where average temperature and relative humidity add up to less than 100, advises Hall. One hot spell in a metal storage building can quickly destroy germination potential.

Most grass seeds will weather 77-degree-F temperatures for up to two years before germination declines, according to one research study. But orchardgrass and tall fescue are notable exceptions.

In that study, orchardgrass germ scores dropped extraordinarily fast after 12 months, even at room temperatures. Scores on orchardgrass dropped to 30% within 24 months and tall fescue fell to under 80%.

## Key Points

- New hairy vetch blooms earlier and is winter-hardy in the Northeast.
- As a cover crop, it promises to reduce N costs by 33% to 50%.
- It's a valuable new tool for organic, conventional and no-till farming.

and herbicide applications, plus improve soil quality and tillage. The legume symbiotically fixes nitrogen to nourish

crops that follow.

Vetch is especially valuable in organic systems. But conventional farmers can also use it to lower nitrogen expenses by 33% to 50% and to reduce runoff losses.

By late spring, the plants can be tilled under, or rolled down and killed to leave a ¾-inch-thick thatch mat of dead stems that serves as weed-smothering mulch, says Devine.

Use of conventional vetch varieties

has been restricted by their late-flowering characteristic. If rolled down before flowering, the plants regrow and compete with the main crop.

Purple Bounty solves that problem. It was bred to flower two weeks earlier than common hairy vetch. That allows planting the follow-up main crop earlier in spring, and using longer-maturity corn, pumpkin and tomato varieties.

*Information and photo provided by ARS information staff.*

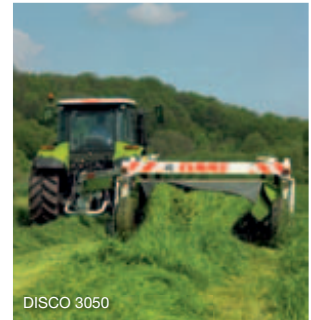


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