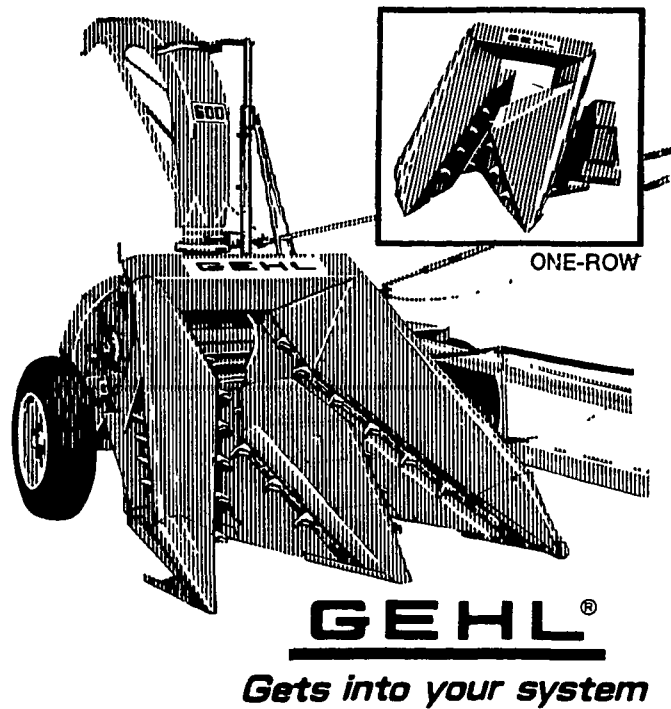


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Crownvetch -- Pennsylvania's Cinderella Plant

Anyone traveling in Pennsylvania this time of year will surely notice masses of dark green vegetation topped with swarms of lavender flowers that line many of the state's major highways.

This plant, known as Penngift Crownvetch, is almost a trademark of Pennsylvania highways. Considered a miracle plant by landscape experts, it has brought hundreds of complimentary letters from out of state visitors, most wanting to know what the "stuff" is and how to grow it.

Crownvetch, a cousin to the pea and the clover, is almost the perfect plant for the hills and slopes along highways. It thrives in the poorest of soils and it survives both drought and flood

with ease.

Its dense vegetation and strong root system stops erosion on the steepest slopes. It never needs fertilizing once it is established and requires no mowing or cutting of any sort. It smothers weeds, but doesn't become a nuisance because it is very easy to control.

It is easy and inexpensive to plant, and once established after about two years the plant virtually takes care of itself.

Crownvetch is a dense dark green mass of foliage about two feet high during its growing season which lasts from May to November. In midsummer, the plants are literally covered with small fragrant pink, white and lavender flowers. From December to March the plant is dormant and takes on the color of the surrounding landscape.

This amazing plant, known to scientists as *Cornillia varia*, is a native of Europe. But it wasn't until years after it found its way to Pennsylvania as an adulterant in alfalfa seed that its potential became known.

Dr. Fred Grau, a professor at Penn State University, was traveling near Virginville, Berks County, in June of 1935 when he noticed a purple flowered plant clinging to a shale hillside where nothing else would grow.

At first, no one knew what the plant was, not even the scientist at Penn State. Robert Gift, on

whose farm it grew, only knew it as "that weed." Later, botanical clues identified it as a member of the legume family which includes peas and clover.

Dr. Grau took seeds and cuttings and started growing crownvetch on two small farms near State College. The plant was named Penngift for the state and farm on which it was found. All our crownvetch is descended from that which Dr. Grau first found.

By 1948 crownvetch cultivation and production was sufficiently advanced that a trial planting was made on a highway cut near Port Matilda, Centre County. The experiment was so successful that others were made and by 1955, crownvetch became a standard plant for erosion control along Pennsylvania highways, replacing honeysuckle and other hard to control vines.

Currently there are over 30,000 acres of crownvetch planted along Pennsylvania highways and the plant is also coming into use in other states. It has also been used to cover earthen dams, levees and strip mines. It can be used for forage, but the cattle must acquire a taste for it. And some crownvetch enthusiasts say the blossoms make a good dessert wine.

The Old Timer



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