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Importance of lucerne seed quality

by Eddie Goldschagg, Specialist Advisor: Seed, SANSOR

When farmers plant seed on a field, they expect a crop with a certain level of performance (albeit grain yield, silage, foggage, or pasture). They expect it to be equal to the potential of the variety, the inputs provided, and the prevailing environmental conditions during the growing period. Although the environmental conditions are out of their control, they can manipulate the quality of the inputs.

Varieties

Of the controllable aspects, seed is the most critical single input determining how the crop will perform. It does not matter if all the other aspects are optimal; in the end, the variety will determine what the yield will be. Varieties are bred with certain characteristics and these characteristics determine how a specific variety will perform under specific conditions. Different varieties will perform differently under the same conditions, for example some will do better than others under drought conditions, but under optimal conditions other varieties may outperform them.

Consequently, it is imperative for farmers to select the correct variety for the intended purpose and for the expected prevailing conditions. In the case of lucerne, some varieties are bred for good hay production, whereas others are more suitable for grazing and drought conditions. Dormancy also plays an important role.

Quality of the seed

Besides selecting the correct variety, farmers must also consider the quality of the seed they sow. When planting their own seed or buying seed from a neighbour, the quality of the seed is unknown. Also, they would not know what its germination potential is, or if it contains unwanted weed seeds, like *Cuscuta* (dodder), which could infest their fields and must then be controlled at great expense.



Lucerne field infested with *Cuscuta* (dodder). Picture from the library of Whitey van Pletsen

The risk of planting seed of unknown quality outweighs by far the price of buying seed from a registered seed company. Buying seed from a registered seed company ensures that it has been tested and is free from weed seeds, has a known germination potential, and is of the correct variety.

The Plant Improvement Act, 1976 (Act 53 of 1976), soon to be replaced by the Plant Improvement Act, 2018 (Act 1 of 2018), regulates the sale of lucerne seed, as well as other important crops. The Acts set minimum requirements for seed being sold, including minimum germination and physical purity (occurrence of weed seed in the seed). Furthermore, according to these Acts, selling seed from sites not registered as sellers of seed in terms of the Act is a criminal offence.

The Plant Breeders' Rights Act, 1976 (Act 15 of 1976) protects some varieties and prohibits selling without permission of the breeder. Unauthorised selling of seed of these varieties can lead to prosecution.

Buying seed from a registered seed company assures farmers that it has been produced in a professional way, has been tested, and will comply with the minimum requirements of the Act. If not, then they can claim from the seed

company and will be supported by the Act. If they were to plant their own seed or seed from an unregistered source, they will not be in a position to claim for any damages.

Certified seed

For further peace of mind, farmers should buy certified seed. A registered company selling a seed lot with a seed analysis report available for it, does not necessarily mean that it is certified. Certification of seed involves a complete control system from the release of the variety by the breeder until the seed is finally made available to the producer. This is done over several generations of multiplication, which will usually take up to three to four seasons. Certification is not compulsory – seed companies need to decide whether or not to certify a specific seed variety. However, for certain varieties, such as SA Select, the sale of uncertified seed has been prohibited in terms of the Plant Improvement Act. As a result, selling such seeds is a criminal offence.

When seed has been certified, it means that:

 it has been field-inspected during the production phase;

- it is indeed the variety that it is supposed to be;
- it has higher purity and germination standards than uncertified seed; and
- its quality has been controlled by an independent body.

The South African National Seed Organisation (SANSOR) is the designated authority for seed certification in South Africa. Seed certification takes place under the guidelines and regulations of the South African Seed Certification Scheme and the Plant Improvement Act. Certified seed is identified with uniquely numbered blue labels on which the National Coat of Arms and the words SA CERTIFIED SEED: SANSOR have been printed. Each container is also sealed with a uniquely numbered SANSOR seal.

Conclusion

Use of own or uncontrolled seed is not only risky and irresponsible, but in many cases, illegal. For peace of mind, buy certified seed, and if not available, seed from a registered SANSOR member company. Then you know you are buying seed that, when planted, will perform optimally under the right conditions and management!

Table 1. Minimum requirements for seed being sold

Standards	Minimum requirements		
	Certified ¹	PIA ²	Farm seed ³
Minimum germination	80%	70%	Unknown
Minimum purity	98%	97%	Unknown
Maximum weed seed	0,2%	0,3%	Unknown
Maximum dodder	1 seed	1 seed	Unknown
Varietal purity and identity	Verified	Unknown	Unknown

¹Certified: Certified by SANSOR in terms of the SA Seed Certification Scheme.

³Farm seed: Own seed or seed bought from unregistered persons.



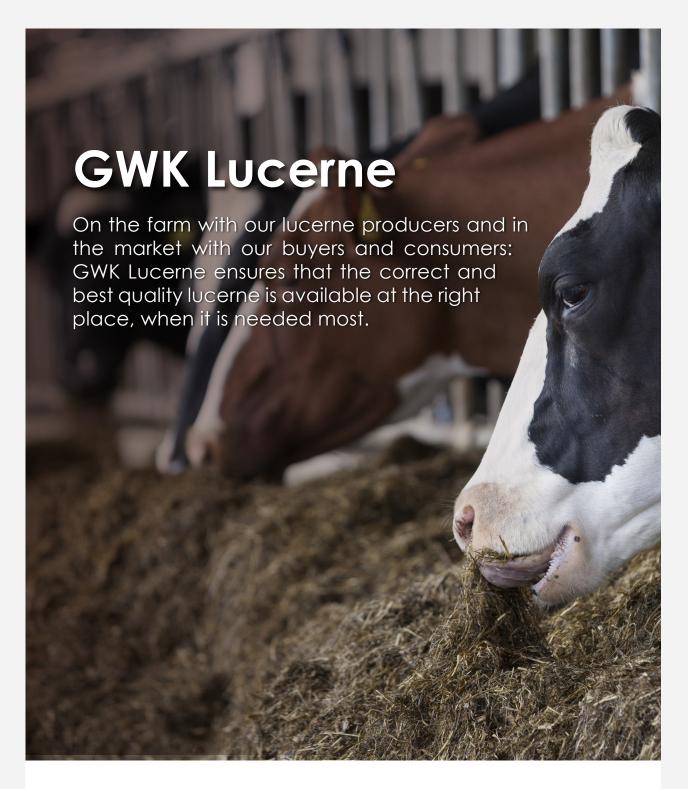
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LUCERNE industry.

Distributed via WhatsApp to lucerne seed and hay producers, stakeholders, role players, and input/service suppliers in the lucerne industry. The NLT News/Nuus also features on the NLT website at https://lusern.org/#



²PIA: The Plant Improvement Act, 1976.





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