

# In praise of hairy vetch

by Hugh Maynard

One of the favourite strategies governments employ in order to reduce costs is "contracting out"; services ordinarily carried out by full-time employees are put out to tender and the private contractor with the lowest bid takes over the task. While the economic benefits of such procedures for governments are apparent, they are often gained at the expense of the level of service provided.

A good example is the cutting of grass medians and borders along Canada's major highways. The government gets the job done cheaper but the contractors just simply don't do the required cutting as often as before, with the result that the grass is not as much cut as it is hacked down a few times a year. For much of the summer months, highways have the straggled appearance of abandoned lots; as the contracting seasons pass, weed species such as canary grass, purple loosestrife and witch grass take over.

There is an alternative to this unaesthetic budgeting that would be both more economic and environmental: the planting of perennial species such as hairy vetch. There are already numerous locations in south-western Ontario where verges have been covered with vetch species, apparently as a trial alternative to spraying ( at least that is the implication from the little posted signs that say "Do not spray"!), and what a difference it makes.

The vetch covers the roadside slopes in greenery virtually the whole summer, resisting until late into the season the temptation to turn brown as do its cousins in the grass family during July. The legume also flowers over an extended period, providing an added bonus, as well as smothering out other undesirables.

Besides just looking good throughout the summer months, the vetch also allows the government to save even more money by not having to cut miles and miles of turf. A little trimming around posts and pylons is all the contracting out that is required.

But even if the modern day urge to cut and trim every swath of greenery that borders the black of asphalt maintains its grip on the administrative psyche of government bureaucracy, then there is still something else that could be accomplished other than just hacking away at the weeds.

The 401 highway between Montreal and Toronto is approximately 500 km in length; multiplied by the 100 m width of grassed median and border that runs along the highway, the surface area from which to harvest hay or feedstock for energy amounts to 5,000 hectares. Taking ethanol as an example and deducting 20% of that area for over-passes and inter-changes, 4,000 hectares could yield 200,000 tonnes of dry matter forage and, from that, 1 million litres of ethanol. This is sufficient to run all of Canada's automobiles for a day.

Multiple that by the many other thousands of kilometres of highway across the country and there can be no justification - economically, environmentally or aesthetically - for maintaining the road network the way governments do. Contract out the grass verges to farmers and let them earn extra cash for themselves (and the government) by harvesting instead of hacking away at the medians of the country's highways.

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