

Edgar Evans  
Introduced Birdsfoot Trefoil to Ontario in 1941

Due to the pioneering efforts of a Dawn Township farmer more than 70 years ago an exciting new cash crop emerged in Lambton County—Birdsfoot Trefoil.

Birdsfoot Trefoil is a perennial legume, a type of clover, that was found to flourish in soils and growing conditions that were largely unsuitable for the production of alfalfa or traditional cash crops such as corn and soybeans. It was most adaptable to the heavy clay soils of South Lambton County which at the time, tended to be poorly drained.

The crop was first introduced to Canada by the late Edgar Evans who, according to his daughter Kathy Elliott and others close to him at the time, received little encouragement from what was then known as the Ontario Department of Agriculture or the agricultural community in general.

Nevertheless, during the decades of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, a time when nearly every farm in the province produced livestock, Birdsfoot Trefoil became known as the “Cinderella Crop” of South Lambton. Many farmers cashed in on the high prices its seed demanded at the time and, consequently, production of this miraculous new clover ballooned across the province and rivaling that of winter wheat.

The production of Trefoil seed during that era was a highly lucrative enterprise and proved to be a financial boon to many rural families in Lambton County. The sale of trefoil seed provided local farmers with annual cash receipts of more than \$400,000 annually, which was an astounding amount of money in those days, not to mention the extensive amounts of pasture, hay and the soil-building properties realized from the crop.

J. Edgar Evans was born July 31, 1875 in Hamilton, Ontario, the son of a Free Methodist minister. At an early age his family moved to Dawn Township where he subsequently continued a successful life of farming at Lot 26, Concession 2 in Dawn Township until his death in 1972 at age 82.

Being a practical and innovative farmer, Evans was singularly receptive to new ideas and during the 1940s he recognized the need for a forage product that would do well on land not otherwise suited to the production of alfalfa, most notably, the poorly-drained, heavy clay soils of his home Township of Dawn.

It should be noted that while the land in South Lambton today is highly productive, in those days farm drainage had not progressed to the level of efficiency it enjoys today. Consequently, much of the land in South Lambton County was poorly drained and the production of traditional cash crops on many of these farms was a major challenge.

Nevertheless, in consultation with Lambton County's long-time Department of Agriculture representative, W.P. MacDonald, Evans learned that the New York State Department of Agriculture had developed and selected a strain of Birdsfoot Trefoil that was adaptable to the land and climate of the Northern United States and Canada. It was said to grow well in both drought and wet conditions and livestock would not bloat on it as was often the case on alfalfa or other clover varieties.

According to his nephew, Ivan Evans, now a retired farmer living in Dresden, Ont., Edgar was reading an American newspaper one day and noticed a small ad posted by Cornell University offering farmers small quantities of this new trefoil variety. He said Edgar was quite eager to obtain some of this seed but that presented a slight problem. Canadian laws of the day did not allow the seed to be brought into Canada.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1941 Edgar made the trip to New York State and with a little negotiating was able to obtain eight pounds of the seed and bring it back to Canada with him. Upon his return Edgar experimented by mixing the Trefoil with some Blue Grass and sowed it on three acres.

Ivan Evans noted that Edgar didn't have immediate success with the crop, recalling that it took him several years to figure out how to grow the new variety, which had characteristics significantly different than alfalfa or the other clover varieties commonly grown in Lambton County at the time.

"He found the best way to get the crop established was to treat it roughly," said Ivan, adding that he found the best way to get a good stand of trefoil was to turn the cattle out on it in early spring when the soil was wet and let them tear it up with their hooves, a practice that would kill off most alfalfa stands.

He noted that it grew much better on the heavy clay of Dawn Township than it did on the lighter, more fertile soils south of Dresden. Cattle do not bloat on it and another major advantage of the crop was that was that it could be let go to seed, threshed, and the pug could be used as livestock feed because it remained green rather than turn black as alfalfa does.

Evans harvested his first major crop of trefoil in 1948 after he discovered that at some point during the year it needed to be let go to seed as it had the ability to reseed itself, making it ideal for permanent pasture or long-time hay production.

Edgar Evans once commented: "If you have a farm that doesn't pay, seed it to Birdsfoot Trefoil, along with any other grass you can grow best. For a permanent hay pasture or a cash crop for seed, it's hard to equal."

Edgar Evans was an enthusiastic member of the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association and was active at both the county and provincial levels. He was also the founder of the Ontario Trefoil Growers Association and in 1964 was recognized by that organization at a testimonial dinner where honoured him with the presentation of a bronze plaque in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the agricultural development of the area (That plaque is now on display at the Oil Museum of Canada in Oil Springs).

Guest speaker for the evening was N.D. MacKenzie, manager of the Ontario Seed Corn Growers' Marketing Board who noted that: "Mr. Evans integrity, knowledge and powers of observation were reflected in his agricultural pioneering."

Dr. William Tossell of the Ontario Agriculture College also spoke that evening and noted that Birdsfoot Trefoil had evolved from Evan's initial three-acre plot to become a major crop in the province that was grown from Windsor to Rainy River with more than a half-million acres in production.

Former Dawn Township reeve and Lambton County Warden Don Williams recalled Evan's introduction of Trefoil was a financial boon to South Lambton County.

"Trefoil seed paid for an awful lot of farms in Dawn Township, I can tell you that," said Williams.

Along with his agricultural pursuits, Edgar Evans was also active in his community.

He was a devoted member of Zion Free Methodist Church where he was also a long-time Sunday School teacher and for many years served as the school trustee for Beaver Meadow School.

His daughter Kathy Elliott said she has many fond memories of those days and her family's involvement in trefoil production.

She added that her father loved to share his knowledge of farming with others and helped many of his neighbours and fellow farmers get started in trefoil production. "He and the late W.P. MacDonald, (former Lambton Agriculture Representative) were great friends and spend many evenings together attending farm meetings," she said.

"They were certainly good times for our family and many others," she said.

"My father was a wonderful man."

The late Edgar Evans was nominated for induction into the Lambton County Agricultural Hall of Fame by the Dawn Township Historical Society.