Jim Hermes is an extension poultry specialist at Oregon State University. He says the best pasture for chickens is one with a variety of plant species for a couple of reasons.

Putting chickens out on pasture is a popular management method for many small flock owners. The birds can freely scratch and peck over a large area, eating to their heart’s content.

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"Nutritionally, the value of the pasture is really tied up in the insects and in any seeds that are created by the pasture grasses," says Hermes. "The grass itself is not of particular value in a poultry diet. They will consume some of the grasses, particularly early in the season, but as you get later it’s not providing very much nutrition other than the birds’ ability to find insects and seeds."

Unlike other pasture-grazing animals, chickens aren’t able to digest plants, because they lack the enzymes to break down the cellulose. But even though chickens don’t consume much of the forage, the pasture still needs to be managed. Poultry can’t move around very well when the grass is a foot-tall. Going through with the mower is one option, but Hermes recommends cattle or sheep to mow it down in a rotational grazing system.

"If you have some cattle ahead of the chickens, then the cattle will keep the grasses down a little bit, move them around, and then have the chickens follow behind," says Hermes. "They’ll clean up materials that are left behind by the cattle, they’ll spread everything around, they’ll find all the insects and things in the manure. They’ll pick up nutrients that the cattle don’t digest so it’s a great relationship."

Chickens also provide good nutrition for the pasture. Their manure leaves behind a healthy dose of nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus.

Click here for chicken-friendly pasture plant suggestions: (A) below

Learn more about pastured poultry production (B) below: page not found when link was clicked
The main reason I hunted down a copy of Raising Poultry on Pasture was to figure out which pasture plants are best for chickens to eat. The unfortunate answer is that most people raising chickens on pasture just use typical forage grasses and legumes, assuming that chickens eat the same thing as cows, even though their stomachs and dietary needs are entirely different. Small wonder that one chapter's author basically said that chickens don't get much except vitamins and minerals from pasture.

In a previous post, I've written about ways of combining chickens with cows or vegetable gardens to spice up rotational pastures, so I won't repeat that information here. Instead, I thought I'd list the plants various medium-scale producers have planted in their pastures:

**Unimproved pastures** are quite common. In other words, farmers put their chickens on some kind of low grass/weed mixture that's probably been kept tree-less through annual bush-hogging and/or grazing with other animals. One unimproved pasture listed in Raising Poultry on Pasture was made up of fescue, thinning brome, broadleaf weeds, and lespedeza.

- **Legumes** are cited by many producers as being favorites of their chickens. Specifically, white clover (New Zealand and other varieties) is mentioned by several chicken keepers as a good long term cover. Subclovers (subterranean clovers) are useful in very poor soil and are commonly grown in Australia, Texas, and California. One farmer mentioned growing peas in an early spring pasture, but said that the chickens didn't get as excited about the succulent peas as he thought they would.

- **Broadleaf plants**, in general, are preferred by chickens over grasses. No wonder --- chickens aren't ruminants and they aren't able to digest grass any more than you can. I wonder if there are weeds like dock, plantain, or others that stand up well to heavy chicken scratching and browsing and are still tasty for our chickens?

- **Grasses** are usually mixed in with broadleaf plants on permanent pastures to hold the soil in place, even if the grasses don't do much for the chickens. Common grasses in the chicken pasture include orchardgrass, perennial ryegrass, tall fescue, and annual ryegrass. Although I don't think grasses provide much food for chickens directly, Joel Salatin wrote that grass provides habitat for grasshoppers, which his chickens love, so perhaps these nearly inedible plants have a place in the chicken pasture after all.

- **Grains** are used by many chicken producers for early spring pasture, especially by farmers who use the chickens in rotation with row crops and thus till the pasture every year. Oats and annual rye are both listed as early spring pasture crops. On the other hand,
grains are grasses, and chickens don't tend to get much out of them once the leaves age and firm up.

Pasture management is another important point to consider when planning for your chickens' needs. When plants get over four to eight inches tall (depending on who you talk to), the leaves become higher in carbon and less digestible by chickens. Many farmers advocate mowing or heavy grazing to keep plants short and always producing more green shoots. On the other hand, I wonder whether taller grass would provide a more diversified habitat for the insects chickens crave?

Have you planted a traditional pasture for chickens? What did you put in it? Which plants did your chickens gravitate toward?