

Ag Column

Chris Ramsey

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## Food Plots Have Much to Offer Wildlife

Houses, houses, and more houses are taking the valuable habitat where deer once lived. Now they're eating our garden, causing auto accidents, and often being a nuisance. Consider planting a warm-season food plot for wildlife. Some readers may be thinking, "Why would I want to attract wildlife, especially deer?" By planting a food plot, we can replace some of the habitat taken by development.

It's all of a matter of available habitat which includes food, water, shelter, and space. Deer invade home landscapes in search of food. Wildlife food plots are an alternative for providing a food source for wildlife where natural habitat is diminishing. Food plots also provide smaller wildlife protection from predators and weather.

According to Dr. Craig Harper, UT Extension Wildlife Specialist, the best food plot should be planted with a combination of forage species. Multi-species plots will ensure forage availability over a longer period of time and will reduce that the chances of a total failure due to pests or drought.

Harper also points out that wild turkeys and quail benefit by feeding on the insects and other invertebrates in the plot. Mowing a strip through the plot will make the grain more accessible to smaller birds like quail and dove.

Food plots should be located away from roads to help reduce poaching. I recommend that you get a soil sample and follow the recommendations for soil and fertilizer.

Some good forage species for wildlife are alyceclover, American joint vetch, buckwheat, dwarf essex rape, forage-type turnips, soybeans, and cowpeas. Don't forget to inoculate the legumes prior to planting to ensure nitrogen fixation. According to Harper, properly inoculated seed may produce over 100 pounds of nitrogen per acre.

When seeding the food plot, it is critical that you prepare a good seedbed. You'll probably need to cultipack or firm the seedbed prior to seeding. The seed should be covered only very lightly. If you don't have cultipacker, you'll need to focus on good seed-to-soil contact and not get the seed too deep.

Food plots will add to the quality and quantity of the natural vegetation available to wildlife. For more, you may be interested in the UT Extension publication, PB 1769 – A Guide to Successful Wildlife Food Plots Blending Science with Common Sense.