



Extension FactSheet

Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2120 Fyffe Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210

Establishing Wildlife Food Plots

Chris Zoller

Extension Agent
Agriculture, Natural Resources
Community Development

Daniel McMillen

Private Lands Biologist
ODNR Division of Wildlife

Establishing food plots for wildlife is not a difficult process and can be done with minimal investment. A basic understanding of the soil, the wildlife species you wish to attract, and wildlife food preferences will help make your food plots successful. When done properly, food plots can provide opportunities to view wildlife or develop a healthier wildlife population. Establishing food plots can also be a great activity for a family or members of a conservation organization.

Goals of the Food Plot

Before investing time, labor, and money, ask yourself why you want to establish food plots. Do you hope to increase the health and quality of the animals on your property? Do you simply want to increase your chances of viewing more wildlife? Is there a particular species of wildlife you want to attract?

Ask yourself, family members, or conservation club members these questions and prepare a list of goals for the project. Once these are identified, completing the project will be much easier.

Preparing the Site

Soil is the building block from which plants grow, and without proper soil nutrient levels, plants will not achieve their maximum yield. Sampling and testing the soil is the only way to know for certain the present nutrient levels and which nutrients must be added to achieve optimum plant growth. Obtain a copy of your county soil survey from your local Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) office and a USGS topography map as you begin the planning process.

Using a shovel and a plastic bucket, walk in a zigzag pattern through the area you wish to establish. Take

random soil samples to a depth of six to eight inches and place the samples in the bucket. The key to soil sampling is taking random samples. The more samples you take, the more accurate your results.

Generally speaking, fields up to 30 acres in size can be sampled as one field. However, if there are varying soil types or obvious differences in a field that may be unique, you may want to consider isolating these areas and sampling them as separate units.

After completing the sampling process, thoroughly mix the soil in the bucket and take enough out to fill the sample bag provided by the lab. Sampling kits are available through your local Ohio State University Extension office or from various commercial soil-testing labs throughout Ohio. If the soil is moist, allow it to air dry before mailing. Once dried, follow the instructions on the form for mailing.

You should receive your soil test results within two weeks. The report will explain your present soil nutrient levels and make recommendations for lime and fertilizer based on the crops you intend to plant. As a rule of thumb, soil testing should be done once every three years. If you have questions about your soil test report, contact your county OSU Extension office.

Sizing the Plot

As you consider your proposed site, give some consideration to the size of your food plots. Your plot can be any size, but it should be large enough to be functional to wildlife. To be effective, your plot should be at least 1,000 square feet. No more than 1/4 to 1/2 acre of food plot is usually needed for each 20 acres of land. If your food plot is expected to provide winter cover, then plots of an acre or more are necessary.

Food plots are usually planted in long strips adjacent to good winter and/or escape cover such as a brushy fencerow, field border, windbreak, woodland edge, or wetland. Strip width can vary, but the wider the strips, the more food and cover created for wildlife. The closer the food plot is to good dense cover, the more use it will have by wildlife.

What and When to Plant

Two factors will help determine which crops to plant in your food plot. The first is your goal(s) for the project. Wildlife species differ in the plants that they prefer. The second is the landscape around the proposed site. If acres and acres of corn and soybeans surround you, planting more of the same probably will not attract wildlife to your property. However, if there are none of these fields in your area, you may be able to attract wildlife that uses these crops.

Table 1 provides a list of some of the more common crops used in wildlife food plots, along with the wildlife they attract, planting dates, and seeding rates.

Where Do I Get Seed?

Seed may be purchased from businesses that supply seeds to farmers. Check with farmers in your area. They may be able to suggest a particular seed dealer. In addition, many wildlife organizations such as the National Wild Turkey Federation, Pheasants Forever, Quail Unlimited, Quality Deer Management, or Ducks Unlimited may provide seeds for food plots.

Some county soil and water conservation districts also sell wildlife food plot seeds. Also check with any sporting goods stores in your area. Many of these businesses sell pre-packaged food plot seeds.

Equipment

Many food plots can be established with a minimum investment in equipment. A small tractor, disk, and corn planter or grain drill will often do the job. If you own an ATV, there are several manufacturers of seeders, fertilizer spreaders, and other attachments designed specifically for use with an ATV.

For small areas, once the area has been prepared, planting the seeds by hand can be done successfully.

Table 1: Crops Used for Wildlife Food Plots, Planting Dates, and Seeding Rates.

Crop	Wildlife Species	Planting Date*	Seeding Rate
Corn	D, T, S, R, P, Q	April 10 – May 10	3 to 4 lbs/acre
Soybeans	D, T, P, Q	April 30 – May 10	150,000 seeds/acre
Wheat	D, CG, DV, T	September 30 – October 10	75 to 120 lbs/acre
Alfalfa	D	April 1 – May 15 or August 1 – August 30	10 to 15 lbs/acre
Sunflowers	D, DV, GF, SB	May 20 – June 15	20,000 plants/acre
Clovers	D	April 1 – May 15 or August 1 – August 20	6 to 8 lbs/acre
Sorghum	D, P, Q, DV, T	April 20 – May 20	8 to 12 lbs/acre
Buckwheat	D, T, WF, P, Q, D	May 1 – July 20	36 to 72 lbs/acre
Millet	WF, DV	May 10 – July 10	15 to 20 lbs/acre
Annual Rye	D, CG, T, DV	April 1 – May 1 or August 1 – August 20	6 to 8 lbs/acre
Key to wildlife species: D = Deer; T = Turkey; S = Squirrel; R = Raccoon; SB = Songbirds; P = Pheasants; Q = Quail; DV = Doves; WF = Waterfowl; GF = Goldfinches; CG = Canada Geese			
*Consult the <i>Ohio Agronomy Guide</i> for precise dates depending on your location.			

Many soil and water conservation districts have seeding equipment for rent on a per-acre basis. In some cases, local farmers can be hired to complete the tillage and planting.

Common Errors

Here are some common mistakes made by people establishing food plots:

- More is better. Exceeding the seeding, lime, or fertilizer recommendation is a waste of both time and money and, in the case of lime and fertilizer, too much may negatively affect the crop. The recommendations for seeding and nutrient application have been researched and should not be exceeded.
- Not fertilizing. Most crops need applications of fertilizer to help them grow and achieve maximum productivity. Don't assume your soil doesn't need fertilizer. Soil test — don't guess.
- Using old seed. Seed that is old may not have been properly stored and handled. Make certain to use new, high quality seed in your food plot.
- Planting agricultural seeds in shaded areas. Plants grown for agricultural purposes require sunlight for energy and growth. Avoid placing these seeds in shaded areas such as woods.

- Not planting enough acres. Food plots that are too small are ineffective. Food plots can be any size, but should be at least 1,000 square feet. Food plots of 1/4 to 1/2 acre in size for every 20 acres are a good rule of thumb.
- Planting too late for maturity. All crops require a certain number of days to grow and mature. If the plants are planted too late, they will not mature and will fail to provide food to wildlife.
- Planting southern seed varieties. Because of climate differences, many seed varieties suitable for the southern United States are not well adapted to Ohio conditions. Use plants that have been proved to grow in Ohio conditions.

Summary

Establishing wildlife food plots can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Use this fact sheet as a guide and work with your county OSU Extension agent or Ohio Division of Wildlife private lands biologist to help make your project successful.

References

Ohio Agronomy Guide, Bulletin 472, Ohio State University Extension
Food Plots for Wildlife, Ohio Division of Wildlife

Reviewer

Dr. Amanda Rodewald, Ohio State University Extension Wildlife Specialist

Visit Ohio State University Extension's web site "Ohioline" at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu>

All educational programs conducted by Ohio State University Extension are available to clientele on a nondiscriminatory basis without regard to race, color, creed, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, gender, age, disability or Vietnam-era veteran status.

Keith L. Smith, Associate Vice President for Ag. Adm. and Director, OSU Extension

TDD No. 800-589-8292 (Ohio only) or 614-292-1868

6/04-des